



**“Community Action for Full Inclusion in Education”
project**

**Out of School Children in Seven Communities of
Shirak Province, Armenia:
Summary Report of the Mapping Study**

Prepared for the Armenian Caritas
December, 2017

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List of Acronyms

MLSA	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
NSS	National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia
SEN	Special Educational Needs
UNCRPD	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Summary

The government of Armenia has committed to making all primary and secondary schools inclusive for children with disabilities by 2025, and decreasing the number of special schools as a result. However, the first few years of the reform have already revealed multiple gaps. Lack of basic accessibility of the schools, insufficiently specialized staff, along with the prevailing stereotypes around disability are a major hindrance for providing quality education to children with special needs. As a result, studies claims, a large segment of children with disabilities are left out of education.

In February 2017, the “Armenian Caritas launched Community Action for Full Inclusion in Education” project, funded by the European Union, Austrian Development Agency and Caritas Austria. The overall objective of the project is children with disabilities who are currently out of education enjoy their human rights for inclusive education. The project targets 12 inclusive schools in seven communities of Shirak province. The mapping study conducting within the scope of the project was to identify children with disabilities who are currently out of the mainstream education system in the seven target communities of Shirak province.

The study used the database of people with diagnosed disabilities maintained by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia (MLSA) as a point of departure to identify school-aged children who were out of mainstream schools. The database was complemented with data collected and maintained by the local polyclinics and the relevant departments of the regional and local government in Shirak. For the purposes of this mapping study, driven by the fundamentals of inclusive education, the study defined children “out of education” as children (1) enrolled in special schools; (2) with no school enrollment registered at special institutions; (3) receiving home schooling; and (4) with no school enrollment living in a family.

According to the database of the MLSA, there are 645 school-aged children with disabilities registered in Shirak province, of which 456 in the targeted seven communities. The mapping study found that of these children:

- 205 were enrolled in mainstream inclusive schools and 77 were enrolled with not yet inclusive mainstream schools;
- 49 of the children were enrolled in one of the special schools in the targeted communities, in Artik and Gyumri;
- 73 children were registered at Children’s home. However, while still on the database, 44 are above eight years of age, and are no longer at the Children’s Home. From the remaining 29 school-aged children, two were enrolled in inclusive schools, and four with mainstream schools in Gyumri;
- 8 were not enrolled in any school;

- No children receiving only homeschooling were identified during the research, requiring further follow-up by the social workers of the Armenian Caritas.

While the findings of the mapping study indicate the whereabouts of the children with disabilities, desk research and key informant interviews conducted in the scope of this study urge to focus not only on the number of children's enrollment, but the actual attendance and the quality of inclusive education in the country. As both the schools and the parents have incentives to enroll children in schools, real attendance and participation in the classroom with the peers should be one of the main indicators of measuring inclusivity.

In general, the study encountered multiple challenges with the lack of consolidated information, inaccuracies in the available databases and records on children with disabilities. The mapping study revealed that 28 children had migrated, and seven were deceased, yet they remained in the database. The children registered with the Children's Home in Gyumri above eight years of age also remain registered at the Children's Home in the database, while they do not reside there any longer. The study found lack of cooperation between the key stakeholders, which creates additional obstacles for ensuring children with disabilities are not left behind. Thus, one of the main recommendations to state, local and international organizations working in the field of inclusive education is to establish official frameworks for cooperation, including information exchange. Only through coordinated efforts it may be possible to achieve quality education for all.

Introduction

In February 2017, the Armenian Caritas launched “Community Action for Full Inclusion in Education” project, funded by the European Union, Austrian Development Agency and Caritas Austria. The overall objective of the project is children with disabilities who are currently out of education enjoy their human rights for inclusive education, as specified in the Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The specific objectives of the project are to (1) ensure that children with disabilities who are currently out of education in the province of Shirak receive quality education in their neighborhood mainstream schools; and (2) strengthen community capacity to monitor and enforce enrolment of children with disabilities to school and report on cases of its violation.

Within the scope of the project, a mapping study was carried out in Shirak province. The aim of the study was to identify children with disabilities who are currently out of the mainstream education system in the seven target communities of Shirak province, revealing the obstacles for children's inclusion. The study also aimed at identifying the constraints for the school administrations, gaps in the coordination and networking of the key stakeholders and possibilities to overcome the barriers for inclusion. The research results will be used by the Armenian Caritas to ensure that children with disabilities in the selected communities are included in the mainstream education. This report presents the results of the mapping exercise, laying out some of the main constraints and challenges encountered in the process.

Overview of the Situation in Armenia

General Socio-Economic Snapshot

Shirak is the second largest province of Armenia by its population size. It is also one of the poorest. According to the most recent data published by the National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia (NSS), poverty rate in Armenia was 29.4 percent, only a .4 percent decrease in comparison to the previous year.¹ From the 29.4 percent, 1.8 percent lived in extreme poverty, 8 percent were very poor and 19.6 percent were poor. The poverty rate in Shirak is alarmingly higher than the national rate, with around half of its population living in poverty (see Table 1).

¹ National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia. (2017). *Social Snapshot and Poverty in Armenia, 2017*. Retrieved from http://armstat.am/file/article/poverty_2017_english_2.pdf

Table 1: Basic Poverty Indicators, by Provinces and Yerevan, 2016 (% , 95% Confidence Interval)

Province	Extremely Poor	Poor
Yerevan	1.9	24.9
Aragatsotn	0.6	15.7
Ararat	1.0	26.9
Armavir	1.5	30.0
Gegharkunik	1.0	28.8
Lori	2.7	35.8
Shirak	3.7	45.5
Syunik	1.1	24.2
Vayots Dzor	1.2	18.8
Tavush	1.9	33.8
Total	1.8	29.4

Source: NSS, 2017

Poverty impacts every aspect of child’s development. In 2016, 2.0 percent of children below 18 lived in extreme poverty and 34.2 percent lived in poverty.² Child poverty rates in Shirak are also the highest in the country.

Table 2: Child Poverty Rate, by Province and Yerevan, 2016 (%)

Province	Extreme child poverty rate	Total child poverty rate
Yerevan	1.8	27.4
Aragatsotn	0	11.7
Ararat	1.7	35.6
Armavir	1.7	34.4
Gegharkunik	1.1	40.0
Lori	3.4	39.3
Shirak	3.7	50.9
Syunik	1.5	29.1
Vayots Dzor	1.8	24.4
Tavush	3.1	40.0
Total	2.0	34.2

Source: NSS, 2017

Social-economic conditions directly impact educational indicators such as attendance and drop-out rates. In the academic year 2016-2017, the gross enrollment rate in schools was 86 percent, including 91.2 percent in elementary, 90.7 percent in basic and 65.1 percent in high schools.³

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

There are no national comprehensive studies on the reasons behind non-attendance, however, the reasons for drop-outs indicates the role of the poor social-economic conditions and disability. According to the NSS data, in 2016, 260 children dropped out of school, of which 174 dropped out due to poor social-economic conditions, 61 - parents did not send the child to school, and 10 dropped out due to disability.⁴

Inter-connected with the socio-economic conditions and similarly effecting educational indicators, is the high migration rate in the country. Here again, Shirak has the highest migration rate in the country, particularly of those who have left and not returned. The table below shows the percentage of the household members of age 15 and above involved in migration processes, disaggregated by province.

Table 3: Household members of age 15 involved in migration processes as of 2016, by Province

	Involved in migration processes, as of 2016			Total
	Migrated and not returned	Migrated and returned	Arrived to that locality for the first time	
Yerevan	18.0	26.2	58.5	22.5
Aragatsotn	7.4	0.7	-	4.6
Ararat	11.7	6.2	-	9.2
Armavir	6.5	1.7	-	4.4
Gegharkunik	7.3	15.0	-	10.0
Lori	10.2	15.0	11.4	12.1
Kotayk	7.9	17.2	11.7	11.6
Shirak	19.5	9.3	-	14.9
Syunik	3.9	1.1	-	2.7
Vayots Dzor	1.6	2.0	2.9	1.8
Tavush	6.0	5.6	15.5	6.2

Source: NSS, 2017

Due to the unregulated nature of migration in Armenia, many children who have migrated with their parents remain on the records in Armenia, inflating non-attendance numbers in schools.

Organization of Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs

The government of Armenia has committed to making all primary and secondary schools inclusive for children with disabilities by 2025, and decreasing the number of special schools as a result. The process of making schools “inclusive” is implemented in stages, on province-by-province basis. Since its inception, 248 out of the 1354 general education schools in Armenia have become “inclusive.” According to the Ministry of Education, during the 2016-2017 academic

⁴ Ibid

year, 6,700 students with special educational needs (SEN) were enrolled in general education schools providing inclusive education.

The Law of the Republic of Armenia on General Education defines person with special educational needs as “a person having difficulties related to the instruction, including physical and mental peculiarities of development, who needs special conditions for education for mastering basic programmes of general education.”⁵

The Law on the Education of Persons Needing Special Education Conditions was adopted in 2005, to regulate legal, organizational and financial basis for persons with SEN to receive education according to their abilities, as well as to establish the rights and responsibilities of those involved in the organization of education for persons with SEN.⁶ According to the Article 6 of the Law, persons with SEN have a right to free medical and medical-psychological-pedagogical assessment and education according to their developmental specifics and age. Persons with SEN can receive special pedagogical assistance from the special education teacher and (or) at the rehabilitation centers and through the organization of special educational services in the communities. Persons with SEN can use the services of an assistant if necessary according to the established state regulations. Persons with disability also have the right to benefit from the privileges set by the law.⁷ According to the Law, the Government provides for the creation, maintenance and development of the learning conditions for persons with SEN through the state budget means, in accordance with the national educational development programs.

Armenian legislation of school enrolment gives the parents/caregivers the right and freedom to choose the school for the child. The first step for the enrolment is the parent’s application to the school. The school has no right to turn the application down unless the school has already exceeded its capacity for the intake. This is rarely the case in the schools in Armenia, except a few elite schools in the capital. The freedom of school choice is true for all children – children with disabilities have the right to be enrolled in mainstream, not only inclusive and special schools. In addition to the Armenian legislation, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities prescribes “reasonable accommodation” to ensure equal enjoyment of rights and freedoms for all. However, children with disabilities are enrolled in mainstream schools on general basis, with many schools unable to provide for their basic special needs.

⁵ The Law of the Republic of Armenia on General Education (adopted 10 July, 2009). Retrieved from <http://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=97415>

⁶ Law on Education of Persons Needing Special Education Conditions (adopted 25 May, 2015). Retrieved from <http://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=67166>

⁷ Ibid.

The child does not have to have a registered disability and vice versa to be considered a student with SEN.⁸ Special education need is decided based on an assessment conducted by the Medical-Psychological-Pedagogical Assessment Centre, which up until recently had only three centers across the country – in Yerevan, in Lori and Syunik provinces. A recent Government Decree N 1058-Ն dated October 13, 2016 establishes the charter of the Republican and Regional Pedagogical Psychological Support Centers, which are to replace the Medical-Psychological-Pedagogical Assessment Centre. According to the Decree, the aim of the Republican Pedagogical Psychological Support Center is to coordinate services in the sphere of pedagogical and psychological support as well as to ensure centralized principles for the assessment and support of child’s special educational needs. The goal of the Republican Center is to improve accessibility, effectiveness of educational services and participation opportunities in the organizations of child’s education. The aim of the Regional Pedagogical Psychological Support Centers is to provide pedagogical and psychological support services in education. The main goal of the Regional Centers is to contribute to the organization of education in the regions supported by the Centers, and to support inclusion of children with special educational needs.⁹ Still at the reorganization stage, there will be one Republican and 20 Regional Centers, including two in Shirak province – in Gyumri and Artik.

The first few years of the reform have already revealed multiple gaps. According to research conducted by Arevik Anapiosyan, focusing on enrollment rather than on the quality of the education is one of the salient policy concerns.¹⁰ A recent study conducted by the Human Rights Watch found that children with disabilities do not receive quality and equal education in the mainstream schools, they are often absent, are not in the classrooms with the rest of the class, or do not participate in the academic curriculum. Among the main obstacles the research lists, “The lack of reasonable accommodations, including basic physical accessibility in buildings; sufficient, trained staff; and a lack of individualized approach to children’s education and social development impedes the ability of many children with disabilities to enjoy a quality education.”¹¹

⁸ Anahit Muradyan. 2015. Inclusive Education. Retrieved from <http://disabilityinfo.am/9672/> on August 13, 2017.

⁹ Republic of Armenia Government Decree N 1058-Ն dated October 13, 2016 on Establishing Sample charters and the List of the Republican and Regional Pedagogical Psychological Support Centers.

¹⁰ Anapiosyan, A. (2014). *Approximation of Inclusive Education in Armenia to International Standards and Practices*.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch. (2017). *‘When Will I Get to Go Home?’ Abuses and Discrimination against Children in Institutions and Lack of Access to Quality Inclusive Education in Armenia*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/02/22/when-will-i-get-go-home/abuses-and-discrimination-against-children-institutions>

The schools lack not only physical accessibility, but do not have adequate facilities such as bathrooms to accommodate different needs of the students. There are also no adequate accommodations for different learning needs such as accessible materials and aids.¹²

Understaffing and the lack of specially trained staff were highlighted by different research. Due to insufficient staffing, the parent often has to stay with the child at schools through the day.¹³ According to a research conducted by Anapiosyan, 90 percent of the subject teachers interviewed in their study lacked knowledge in teaching methodologies to include children with special educational needs into classroom activities.¹⁴ Fear of stigma also plays a significant role in enrolling children with disabilities in the mainstream schools.

Additionally, while an improvement from the existing Assessment Centers, Regional Pedagogical Psychological Support Centers in Gyumri and Artik would still be insufficient to fully address the need in the entire province. Children are assessed by the Center based on parents' initiative, and in some cases, schools encourage the parents to have their child assessed. The expenses connected with the assessment should be covered by the parent. Even simple transportation expenses can become a hurdle for many families to travel to the Regional Center in Gyumri and Artik to undergo the assessment.

In 2014, UNICEF Armenia, in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Science and Lori Regional Administration, piloted a cross sector protocol for identifying out-of-school children in the province. The pilot was aimed at identification of out-of-school children in general, including children with disabilities. Through the pilot exercise, 228 children were identified as out of school. Out of these children, 212 were six to eight years old children who had not yet enrolled in first grade. Following case management, 72 children ages six to eight years of age and 11 children nine to sixteen years of age enrolled in school.¹⁵ Based on the success of the pilot, UNICEF has initiated the second phase of the project. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education and the National Center of Educational Technologies, UNICEF is aiming at creating an online platform for early referral of children left out of the mainstream school system, also tackling absenteeism. The long-term goal is to advocate for the nation-wide adoption of the system by the Government.

¹² Save the Children. (2015). *Child Rights Situation in Analysis: Armenia*. Retrieved from <https://armenia.savethechildren.net/sites/armenia.savethechildren.net/files/library/book-eng.pdf>

¹³ Human Rights Watch. (2017). *'When Will I Get to Go Home?' Abuses and Discrimination against Children in Institutions and Lack of Access to Quality Inclusive Education in Armenia*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/02/22/when-will-i-get-go-home/abuses-and-discrimination-against-children-institutions>

¹⁴ Anapiosyan, A. (2014). *Approximation of Inclusive Education in Armenia to International Standards and Practices*.

¹⁵ UNICEF. (2015). *Identification of out-of-school children A successful cross-sectoral approach in Lori Marz, Armenia*. Retrieved from <http://www.unicef.am/uploads/files/docs/OOSC%20Armenia%20Pilot-CaseStudy%20eng.pdf>

Methodology

The main objective of the study was the identification of children with disabilities out of the mainstream education system. The study used mixed methods and triangulated data to identify children with disabilities in the target communities of Shirak province. Driven by the fundamentals of inclusivity, the study defined “out of school children with disabilities” as children (1) enrolled in special schools; (2) with no school enrollment registered at special institutions; (3) receiving home schooling; and (4) with no school enrollment living in a family.

The initial mapping was conducted using the national database of people with disabilities maintained by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MLSA). The database is the most comprehensive registry of people with diagnosed disabilities in Armenia. The database of school-aged children was juxtaposed with the list of children registered in all mainstream, inclusive and special schools of the targeted seven communities. These lists were acquired from the Department of Education of Shirak Province. School-aged children registered with the Children’s Home in Gyumri were also separated from the list for further follow-up.

The initial mapping results were further refined by (1) validating the lists with the registries of children with disabilities maintained by the local polyclinics; (2) complementing the lists by the cases registered with the Department of Family, Women and Children Issues of the Regional Municipality of Shirak and the Municipalities of the targeted communities; and (3) beneficiary list of Emili Aregak Center, which serves 95 children with severe disabilities, of which 55 school are school aged.

Based on the refined lists, Armenian Caritas social workers conducted home visits to initiate intervention with the parent/main caregiver. During the visit, the social workers opened case files for each of the identified child. The case files allow for a follow up based on individual needs of each identified child. The social workers continue collecting data on various education indicators of the target children through regular visits.

In addition to a desk research, to set the mapping study in the context, 20 interviews were conducted with representatives of the regional and local authorities, international and local organizations, relevant agencies, school headmasters, teachers, and special education experts. The study does acknowledge that not all children with SENs have a diagnosed disability and therefore are not in the MLSA database. As already highlighted in the Country Overview section of this report, special educational needs are often assessed at the encouragement of the schools. These children are already enrolled in a school. The project implementation team has acquired the full lists of children with SEN enrolled in all the inclusive schools in the project communities during the mapping study. Follow-up and monitoring activities in these schools will focus on the actual attendance of these children.

Analyses of the Main Findings

Demographic Overview

According to the list of children with disabilities diagnosed and registered with the MLSA, there are 1,457 children with disabilities in Shirak province, of whom 645 children born between 2002 and 2011. The table below provides the geographical location of the school-aged children with disabilities registered in Shirak.

Table 4: Children with disabilities born between 2002 and 2011 registered in Shirak province, by the administrative region

Administrative region	Children with disabilities born 2002 -2011
Akhuryan	69
Amasia	13
Ashotsk	22
Artik	112
Gyumri	377
Maralik	52
Total	645

Source: RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, as of June 8, 2017

The table below provides the number of school-aged children registered in Shirak, disaggregated by their age.

Table 5: Children with disabilities born between 2002 and 2011 registered in Shirak province, by date of birth

Year of birth	Children with disabilities ages 6-15
2002	23
2003	70
2004	68
2005	55
2006	59
2007	71
2008	74
2009	84
2010	71
2011	70
Total	645

Source: RA Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, as of June 8, 2017

The “Community Action for Full Inclusion in Education” project targets seven communities in Shirak province. The table below provides the number of school-aged children with disabilities in the target communities. As seen from the table, the majority of children are located in Gyumri.

Table 6: Children with disabilities born between 2002 and 2011 registered in Shirak province, by the target community

Target community	Children with disabilities born 2002 -2011
Artik (city)	37
Akhurik	1
Ashotsk	1
Azatan	10
Getk	1
Maralik (city)	29
Gyumri	377
Total	456

Summary of the Established Baseline Indicators

For the purposes of the mapping study, driven by the fundamentals of inclusive education, we defined “out of education” as children (1) enrolled in special schools; (2) with no school enrollment registered at special institutions; (3) receiving home schooling; and (4) with no school enrollment living in a family. The mapping study found that of 456 children with a registered disability 8 children were not enrolled in a school or an institution, such as the Children’s Home in Gyumri. At the same time, a large segment of the children with disabilities were registered with an inclusive or not yet inclusive mainstream school. The table below provides the summary of the findings of the mapping study.

Table 7: Summary results of the mapping study - the whereabouts of the children with disabilities

Whereabouts of the school-aged children with disabilities	Number of school aged children with disabilities	Percentage of the children with disabilities
Inclusive schools	205	45
Mainstream schools	77	17
Special schools	49	11
Children’s Home	73	16
Not enrolled in any school	8	2
Migrated	28	6
No information	9	2
Deceased	7	2
Total	456	100

The sections below reflect on each of the target groups separately.

Children Enrolled in Special Schools

The study acquired lists of students enrolled in the two special schools of the target communities – Artik and Gyumri. Of the school-aged children with disabilities in the target communities, 49 were registered at Gyumri and Artik special schools. Some of the children enrolled in the special schools come from vulnerable families and do not have a diagnosed disability.

Table 8: Enrollment in Artik and Gyumri Special Schools

Special School	Total Number of Students	Children with disabilities born 2002 -2011
Artik Special School	58	28
Gyumri Special School	59	21

The majority of the children with disabilities in these schools were from the same community. Thus, among the 21 students with disabilities, 7 were from Akhuryan, 12 from Gyumri and 2 from Maralik. Among the 28 students at the Artik special school, 24 were from Artik and 4 were from Maralik.

This and other studies conducted in Armenia show that parents of children with SEN prefer to send their children to special schools, as in most cases the special schools have more specialists, special conditions and smaller classes, which the regular schools cannot provide. However, as part of the Government’s commitment to inclusive education, special schools are to be converted into pedagogical-psychological support centers, which, among other functions, will be responsible for special educational needs assessment and certification. Interviews with management of these schools conducted in the scope of this mapping study revealed that the special schools are not prepared for the transition, and are not clear of their role under the new mandate. The faith of the children attending these institutions is not very clear to the schools, requiring urgent intervention in this transition period to ensure the student of these schools are included in the mainstream education.

Children at Gyumri Children’s Home

MLSA database listed the Children’s Home in Gyumri as a residence address for 73 school-aged children with disabilities. The Children’s Home is for children with disabilities between zero and eight years of age, children are transferred to the specialized children’s home in Nor Kharberd and Marie Izmirlian Children's Home in Yerevan. Thus, of 73 children, 44 are above eight years of age, and are no longer at the Children’s Home, while still remain on the MLSA list for Gyumri. This finding once more highlights the inaccuracies in the database. From the remaining 29 school-aged children, two were enrolled in inclusive schools, and four with mainstream schools in

Gyumri. According to a staff of the Children’s Home, the institution aims at enrolling their residents in the mainstream schools, working closely with multidisciplinary teams at the schools.

Children with No School Enrollment

In targeted seven communities, the study identified eight children who were not registered in any school. Of these children, seven are in Gyumri and one in Azatan. These children were identified through a rigorous process of cross-checking the MLSA list with the records in policlinics in all seven communities, as well as enrollment lists in special and mainstream schools in the target communities. The lists were also cross-checked with the records and case files maintained at the regional and local municipalities. Follow-up home visits were conducted by the project social workers to initiate cases. Similar to the finding of the UNICEF pilot study in Lori province,¹⁶ the mapping study also found 28 cases where the child had migrated. As discussed in the country background section of this report, Shirak has the highest migration rate in country, which subsequently impact school attendance of children with disabilities.

At the time of the mapping study the number of children receiving home schooling was not identified, requiring further follow up work with the Regional Department of Education and the schools in the target communities.

Replicability and Limitations of the Study

The methodology of the mapping study was refined in the process based on the lessons learned and can serve a basis for replication. The research was launched based on the premise that a large percent of children with disabilities are not enrolled in any school. This assumption was largely based on the UNICEF statistics that “one in five children with disabilities do not attend any kind of school.”¹⁷ As it became apparent early in the study, these statistics is not as straightforward, and any study should make a clear distinction between enrollment and actual attendance. This mapping study showed that children with diagnosed disability are mostly enrolled in a school - a mainstream or special. However, enrollment is not a valid indicator in the case of children with disabilities, because as other studies and interviews conducted during this study showed, due to multiple constrains children with disabilities do not regularly attend schools. Thus, monitoring forms for the target schools were designed by the project implementation team to include detailed questions on attendance and participation, including home schooling.

¹⁶ UNICEF. (2015). *Identification of out-of-school children A successful cross-sectoral approach in Lori Marz, Armenia*. Retrieved from <http://www.unicef.am/uploads/files/docs/OOSC%20Armenia%20Pilot-CaseStudy%20eng.pdf>

¹⁷ UNICEF. *Children in Armenia*. <http://www.unicef.am/en/articles/children-in-armenia>

Due to the sensitive nature of the study, there were a number of challenges encountered in the process, which replication of the exercise should take into consideration.

Unavailability of comprehensive lists on children with disabilities

One of main challenges of the study was the absence of comprehensive consolidated data on children with disabilities. Various state institutions collect data on disability (labor, health, social), however, these data are not coordinated. The interviews revealed that there is no coordination between the key stakeholders, particularly between the relevant state agencies. The MLSA compiles the most comprehensive database of children with disabilities as its Medical and Social Expertise Agency is responsible for establishing disability grades. While this database is used by the State Social Security Service under the same Ministry for the provision of social benefits, there is an information gap with other state agencies. For example, the Department of Family, Women and Children Issues of the Regional Municipality does not have access to the database. The Department works only through direct referrals, and their caseload is 10-15 cases of vulnerable children a year, on average. Local non-profit organizations that work with children with disabilities also do not have access to the database of the MLSA. For example, World Vision in Shirak province implements projects for children with disabilities. However, not having access to any databases, and the general reluctance of parents of children with disabilities to initiate socialization of their children, the organization identifies their beneficiaries by going from door to door.

Moreover, as the mapping study showed, the MLSA database of children with disabilities was not up to date and contained inaccuracies. This was highlighted in the pilot study implemented by UNICEF in Lori province as well. Spelling of the names and inaccuracies in the registration addresses makes identification challenging. The list also does not include updates on the status of the registered child, therefore does not account for the cases when the child was deceased or migrated from the country.

Registration versus attendance

The study revealed that school enrolment is not as urgent of an issue as the actual attendance. School enrollment in Armenia, according to the legislation, is done based on the parent's initiative. However, as a number of teachers from the inclusive schools told the research team, the schools unofficially get access to lists from polyclinics and recruit children to their schools. Schools have interest in enrolling students with special educational needs, as from a financial perspective, the budget for inclusive students is 4-5 higher. Moreover, non-transparent

mechanisms of organization of transportation and meals for the students with special education needs may create deviant incentives.¹⁸

Research on the challenges of inclusive education and the interviews conducted within the scope of the mapping study showed that one of the key issues in the organization of education for all remains not only identifying students left out of the mainstream education, but retaining them in schools. With the current gaps in addressing the needs of the student in the inclusive education, many remain registered in schools but not actually attending, or being included.

According to the NSS data on school attendance, over half of the drop-outs are due to socioeconomic reasons.¹⁹ However, as reflected also in the country background of this report, and highlighted by other studies,²⁰ attendance records in Armenia have flaws. As the mainstream schools are funded based on the number of the students, the actual attendance may be lower than the registered number of children. Inaccuracies in the attendance can become even more problematic when it comes to children with disabilities, particularly in the inclusive schools that received more funding for children with SEN.

Children with disabilities not registered at all

Children registered with disabilities form around 1 percent of the total child population in Armenia. Given the international expected benchmark disability rate of 2.5 percent, there are likely to be around 12,000 children with disabilities whose disability is not certified for various reasons such as the unwillingness of the family to get certification or the current diagnosis-based criteria of disability certification. These children remain invisible to the social service system, including education.²¹

¹⁸ Transparency International. (2007). *Potential Abuse in the Implementation of Inclusive Education*. Retrieved from <https://transparency.am/files/publications/1494939660-0-159751.pdf>

¹⁹ National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia. (2017). *Social Snapshot and Poverty in Armenia, 2017*. Retrieved from http://armstat.am/file/article/poverty_2017_english_2.pdf

²⁰ Save the Children. (2015). *Child Rights Situation in Analysis: Armenia*. Retrieved from <https://armenia.savethechildren.net/sites/armenia.savethechildren.net/files/library/book-eng.pdf>

²¹ UNICEF. (2012). *It's about Inclusion: Access to Education, Health, and Social Protection Services for Children with Disabilities in Armenia*. Retrieved from http://www.un.am/up/library/Its%20about%20Inclusion_eng.pdf

Recommendations and lessons learned

1. Work closely with relevant state institutions

As the initial phase of the study showed, one of the keys of success is to get the buy-in of all the stakeholders. UNICEF Armenia also attributes the success of its pilot project in Lori on the identification of children left out of education system to the cooperation with the relevant state institutions, and most importantly, the buy-in from the regional municipality.

2. Work closely with relevant local and international organizations

There are a number of organizations in the region that work with children with disabilities. Establishing a referral mechanism with these organizations can support identification of children left out of the mainstream schools. Close cooperation with Gyumri Disabilities Network can become a good starting point for establishing this mechanism. UNICEF is working with Ministry of Education for the development of a nationwide mechanism of tracking school attendance. Coordination of efforts could maximize the impact and minimize the risk of duplications.

3. Involving local polyclinic/health post

Policlinics are the most vital players in the identification of children with disabilities and their inclusion as they maintain the most up-to-date information on the status of the child. While the polyclinics in Gyumri do not have the authority to share their databases, health-posts and polyclinics in smaller urban and rural communities are more open for cooperation, especially when the cooperation is coordinated with the local authorities. The local nurse has access to all the households in the community and can become a good ally in the identification of children left out of school.

4. Focusing on the actual attendance of the included children

To ensure actual attendance of the students, social workers of the Armenian Caritas should conduct random monitoring visits at the target schools and observe the attendance of the included children. In cases of absenteeism, they should follow up with the parents of the students. While not in the target schools, children registered with non-inclusive mainstream schools should also be monitored for attendance. Home-schooling should be flagged in follow up work with the schools.

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