BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

Regional Preparatory Workshop on Inclusive Education
Eastern and South Eastern Europe

Sinaia, Romania, 14 – 16 June 2007
Regional Workshop - Europe on Inclusive Education
Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

The concept of inclusive education in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a new one, “imported” after the war (since 1996) through the presence and projects of the international organizations (IOs) dealing with education reform and human and children rights in BiH.

Inclusive education in BiH is predominantly seen as an element of social inclusion. Like everywhere else, reports by IOs (UNICEF, UNDP, OSCE etc.) as well as numerous research studies dealing with issues of equality and participation in education in BiH reflect general agreement that a good quality education is the best tool to prevent inequality and the most efficient way to escape poverty and social exclusion.

The basic goal of inclusive education in BiH is based on the premise that every child should have equal right and opportunity in the field of education. At the same time there is no common legal or professional definition and scope of inclusive education in BiH. Also, it covers various vulnerable groups, from poor to returnees (specific for BiH, and to a lesser degree other counties of former Yugoslavia) and minorities (Roma) and, finally, children with special needs. The above-mentioned groups are either not yet fully included and integrated in the mainstream education, or mainstream education does not meet their specific needs, thus making them segregated and excluded.

Absurd administrative fragmentation of BiH (2 Entities, 10 Cantons, Brcko District and very week central government), as well as national (ethnic) politicisation of almost all aspects of “normal life” constitute the major obstacles to the speed, quality and results of the overall education reform.

In this lights it is not surprising that the first time that the concept of inclusive education was recognized and included in a state-level education policy was in November 2002, in a document entitled “Education Reform Strategy: Five Pledges on Education (A message to people of BiH)”. This document became the basis for developing policies, laws and regulations in the field of education.

In a time of post-conflict recovery of BiH, when numerous aspects of discrimination and division were evident on all levels of society and all aspects of every-day life, this document was largely prepared by IOs as a way to introduce and promote universal values of education: quality, equity, inclusion etc.
In summary, in its five chapters (“five pledges”), this document proposed the following:

- Accessibility of education to every child and elimination of all forms of discrimination;
- Modernisation and quality improvement in pre-school, primary and general secondary education;
- Modernisation and quality improvement in vocational education and training;
- Modernisation and quality improvement in higher education;
- Modernisation and quality improvement in financing, administration and legislation of education.

Inclusion is addressed in Pledge 1: “…including children with special needs at all levels of the education system”.

Under the strong influence of the IO and - to a certain degree - contrary to position of the local stakeholders, it is interesting to note that this document treats children with special needs distinct from other groups that are still discriminated against or excluded from the mainstream education in BiH, such as poor, minorities and returnees.

Following this document, the first state-level Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education in BiH was adopted in summer 2003, mentioning education for children with special needs and inclusive education in its several articles (Articles 3, 4 and 19).

However, by being a framework law, it also left plenty of room for misinterpretation and misuse, and therefore should be urgently followed with a separate law or a by-law, based on contemporary international standards and indicators for inclusive and education of children with special needs. Also, a state-level Education agency, as foreseen by this law, with a mandate to develop a state-wide standards, assessments and curricula for primary and general secondary education has not yet been established - four years after the Law has been adopted!

One of the problems in describing or discussing current state of play in inclusive education in BiH is the lack of reliable data and statistics. For this reason the case of BiH has also not been properly presented in any international or regional study dealing with inclusive education.

In 2005 NGO “Duga” produced the first and so far the only relatively comprehensive “Report on children and students with special needs in pre-schools and primary schools in BiH”.

The main purpose of this report was to collect data on children with special needs, and list and explain problems and challenges they face in the process of their inclusion into mainstream education and regular classes. The report was based on a sample of 30 per cent of all pre-school and primary school institutions from the whole territory of BiH. In real numbers, it has covered 175 primary schools with 124,502 students enrolled, and
unknown number of pre-schools with 4,940 children enrolled. When it comes to pre-school education, it is important to note the drastically low coverage of children in BiH with pre-school education. With only around 6 per cent of children in pre-schools in 2005, BiH has been at the very bottom of the scale of European countries in this sector.

According to the findings, there is about 7.99 per cent of students with special needs in primary schools and about 13.17 per cent of children with special needs in pre-schools, which corresponds to the average in other Central and East European countries.

The official beginning of inclusive education in BiH in regards to children with special needs happened only in 2002, with 120 primary schools starting integrating them regular classes.

The findings of the report confirm that early treatment and inclusion of children with special needs is often decisive for future development of these children. A pre-school institution is an ideal place for children to learn living with and accepting those who differ from them, and where growing up in a company of age-mates is stimulating for overall development of children. The report has shown that inclusion of children with special needs is possible and manageable in pre-school institutions even in the earliest age by meeting specific needs of children and combination of individual work and group work and playing with age-mates in regular program.

The role of pedagogue in inclusion of children with special needs is decisive in both pre-school and primary education. And if a pedagogue is a leader, than a teacher is a key for successful inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream education.

The report claims that three quarters of teachers and almost 90 per cent of parents in pre-schools and primary schools support concept of inclusive education.

The main identified problems are inadequate qualification of teachers (both in pre-service and in-service teacher training); rigid curricula (student must adjust to curriculum instead of adjusting curriculum to specific needs and capacities of a child); lack of wider professional support (ministries, pedagogical institutes, training centers etc.); insufficient cooperation with parents and community; inadequate school infrastructure, transport and support services; inadequate financing.

The report ends with a rather comprehensive list of proposed measures to be urgently taken by the education authorities at all administrative levels in BiH:

- Inclusion should be precisely defined by laws on pre-school education, primary and secondary school.

- Regulate by the special Book of Rules which children with special needs, and in what way will be educated in individual segments of education.
- It is necessary to define the number of children in inclusive classroom, and the number of children-students with special needs in it.

- Ensure expert staff – team work (special educator-defectologist, speech-therapist, psychologist) in pre-school institutions and primary schools.

- Establish an accelerated teaching programme within the education system, with clear achievement indicators in order to support talented, endowed and gifted children who achieve distinguished results in school.

- Ensure introduction of assistants and volunteers to groups and classrooms (use civilian military service too), where there are children with special needs.

- Ensure that every child with special needs has a file/record.

- Development of education programmes in inclusion should get a priority.

- Intensify design and implementation of projects for enabling the existing professionals for provision of permanent support to teachers

- It is important, besides design of general programmes of cooperation with parents, to develop operational programme modalities of engagement of parents.

- Establish Council for Inclusion, which will follow up on implementation of inclusion in education of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

- Develop consistent and constant programme of professional training and development of teachers for regular school teachers. Alternative solution: NGOs with experience in teacher education/training.

- Ensure terminology with milder labelling for children with special needs and experts in special education.

- Ensure mechanism for affirmation of larger efforts of teachers in the field of inclusive work.

- Prevent inhumane, unprofessional and unjustified solutions used on the excuse of relating to inclusion, which seriously jeopardize personality and needs of children with special needs.

- Inclusion is a long-term process. If its is not properly directed it may cause more harm than good. It is necessary to evaluate the results through the project of scientific and research center.
In spring 2006 all BiH education ministers (14 in total: BiH Minister of Civil Affairs, 2 Entity, 10 Cantonal and Brcko District Minister of Education) adopted the Action Plan for Children with Special Needs developed by the IOs (led by UNICEF) and local stakeholders, predominantly NGOs. The Plan advocates various actions aiming to promote and develop inclusive education as integral part of the mainstream education in BiH, such as adopting adequate laws or by-laws; changing pre- and in-service teacher training; changing curriculum, educational environment, assessment criteria and school-support measures; developing individual approach and raising awareness on inclusive education etc.

In order to create necessary conditions for systemic change in education of children with special needs, the Plan underlines three main priority actions to be taken at the state-level:

1. Promoting systemic change in order to ensure that children with special needs are included at all levels of the education system (adoption of a by-law on education of children with special needs in primary and secondary schools; development of regular and systemic assessment, new classification system and a database of children with special needs in order to provide them with appropriate educational placement while taking into consideration the best interest of the child);
2. Removal of financial and administrative barriers to ensure inclusion of children with special needs in the mainstream schools to the highest possible degree (allocation of funds within existing education budgets for regular assessment and support for children with special needs);
3. Garnering the support and participation of parents, educational institutions and communities related to the education process.

But one year later there has been no further action by the governments, and while political and intellectual elites have been very vocal and active when it comes to some aspects of education reform - for example of Higher Education, inclusive education does not even get on their or on the public agenda.

Only in the second part of 2007, under new UNICEF project, a detailed mapping out of all BiH pre-schools and primary schools in regards to current status and needs in inclusive education will be carried out.

It is expected that this report would finally bring inclusive education closer to the top of the education reform agenda, and force responsible ministers to make some concrete steps that would include development and adoption of the national policy and a number of strategy choices in this field.

Twelve years after the war in BiH limited development and progress in inclusive education are happening in spite of almost total lack of governmental support and thanks to the still strong presence and projects of IOs and IO’s sponsored network of very active
of NGOs. That, of course, is not enough. But that explains why BiH currently can simply not respond to the growing challenges and European standards in inclusive education.

The attitude of every state and society towards persons with special needs are closely connected to the social, economic, civilisational and cultural conditions of each country. Changes and developments in this field mirror the overall democratic changes and developments of the state and society. It is rather sobering, but according to the situation in inclusive education, one could legitimately conclude that in the last 12 years since the end of the war there has been no significant democratisation of the BiH education system.