

Identification of out-of-school children

A successful cross-sectoral approach in Lori Marz, Armenia



Introduction

While the vast majority of children of compulsory school age in Armenia are going to school, some remain excluded from education due to complex and overlapping factors, such as disability, parental attitudes or cultural practices, language issues, migration, extreme poverty or difficult family circumstances.

This document presents Armenia’s approach to the identification of out-of-school children and their (re)integration in school through cross sector collaboration and the implementation of a case management system. It describes the overarching mechanism applied during a joint initiative between UNICEF, the Ministry of Education and Science and Lori Marz authorities. It documents results and highlights success factors and lessons learnt that could be useful to support other Marz or other countries embarking on the same journey.

The functions of Case Manager and other social services are being introduced in Armenia as part of the Integrated Social Services Reform. It is foreseen that Case Managers will be a first contact point with families, will conduct preliminary needs assessments and make relevant referrals to services. The support to the Government has provided a unique opportunity to test this new approach and generate lessons for the fine tuning of the mandate and responsibilities of this new function.

The range of activities were implemented from April to December 2014 in Vanadzor and Gugark. Following its success, Lori Marz authorities extended the initiative to the whole Lori region between March and December 2015.



Out-of-school children

Out-of-school children are those children of compulsory school age who are not enrolled in and are not attending school. In some cases children never enrol in school when they reach the compulsory school age. Some children enrol late and, for instance, enter the first grade of primary education at 7 or 8 years-old rather than 6 years old as foreseen by legislation. Other children attend school for a few years but they drop out before reaching the age of 16 years old or before completing the ninth grade. A few children are constantly in and out of school, often due to family circumstances and migration.

A range of factors can impact parents' decision not to enrol their children in school or to let them drop out of school. As children grow older they also have more agency in the decision process to remain in or drop out of school. Not enrolling in school or dropping-out of school is usually a process rather than a decision following a single (or exceptional) event.



Protocol of cross-sector collaboration

The approach used in the pilot is based on a **cross-sector protocol** outlining the responsibilities of each of the following stakeholders and the activities they have to implement as part of the identification mechanism of children out of school:

- Schools

- Communities (local authorities)
- Health facilities (polyclinics)
- Police
- Case Managers
- NGOs

A Coordination Council comprising representatives of the Education, Child Protection, Social Services, Health and Police Marz Departments was set up to lead and monitor implementation and to oversee the most complex cases of out-of-school children. In the second phase of the pilot, one NGO joined the Coordination Council.

The protocol addresses 3 main issues:

- The identification of out-of-school children,
- Absenteeism reporting and referral system,
- The case management of children identified as out of school.

Description of the approach

Identification of children out of school

The identification mechanism is made by triangulating lists of children provided by various stakeholders and authorities, namely:

- List of children between 5.6 and 16 years old living in a given locality and their current education status (e.g. "in school", "not in school", "supposed to enter primary school in September", "has already graduated Grade 9") provided by local authorities;
- List of children provided by schools;
- List of children with disabilities retrieved from a national database maintained by the Ministry of Labour and Social Issues;
- List of children in difficult circumstances retrieved from a national database maintained by the Ministry of Labour and Social Issues.

Schools and local authorities are triangulating their lists first before sending them to the Coordination Committee. The Committee

reviews all lists, triangulates them and conducts additional checks in the Ministry of Labour and Social Issues national databases. This results in the establishment of a list of children of compulsory school age who are out of school. Once children are identified, case management begins.

Absenteeism reporting and referral system

The pilot project also established an absenteeism referral system whereby:

- Each child absent for more than 3 days for sickness reasons has to be notified to the health polyclinic for a follow-up with parents. After 7 days of school absence, even for health reason, the school must notify the absence of the child to the Coordination Committee or to the Case Manager when the child is appointed one.
- Each child absent for more than 3 days for reasons other than health must be referred to the Coordination Committee or the Case Manager when the child is appointed one.

The purpose of the absenteeism reporting and referral system is to monitor the attendance of children at risk of dropping out and to respond to cases of unauthorised absences promptly.

Case management

Case Managers conduct family assessments for all children identified as out of school. Then, through discussion and meetings with parents, teachers, community leaders, NGOs, and other professionals, Case Managers try to support the enrolment or return of the child into school. All activities conducted by Case Managers are recorded in a case management template.

Case Managers also follow-up on cases of children absent from school for other reasons than health.

Pilot results

Results for children and families

In the 2014 pilot (Phase 1), 228 children were identified out of school. The largest group was 6 to 8 years old children who had not yet enrolled in Grade 1 (212). An additional 16 children from 9 to 16 years old were also not enrolled and not attending school.

Following case management, 72 children age 6 to 8 years old enrolled in Grade 1 and 11 children age 9 to 16 years old also enrolled.

The identification of children out of school is currently being undertaken for Phase 2 (2015).

The Case Management process also resulted in addressing other needs of children and their families, such as:

- The referral of children to health specialists, including children with disabilities
- Supporting families to secure decent accommodation, to apply and receive social benefits, to secure employment and to solve conflicts between parents and their children.

Other results

In addition to results for children and their families, some degree of attitudinal change has been observed from communities and schools regarding their understanding and perception of their responsibility over identification and reporting of children out of school or regularly absent and over strategies to support their integration in school.

The intervention has also provided a unique opportunity to undertake case management, a cornerstone approach of the Integrated Social Services reform. The development of a needs assessment template and lessons learned from the implementation of the case

management approach have been valuable for the Ministry of Labour and Social Issues.



Success factors

A number of factors contributed to the success of the pilot in Lori region:

Cross-sector cooperation and clear definition of actors' roles and responsibilities. Cross-sector collaboration has been at the core of the pilot approach and has resulted in all sectors working together towards a common goal. The joint development of agreed responsibilities and activities to be undertaken by each sector and stakeholder has smoothed implementation. The representation of all sectors in the Coordination Council has given the Council the necessary credit and authority for their leadership to be recognised.

Holistic understanding of the issue. The Coordination Committee has contributed to building a shared understanding within the Marz authorities, local municipalities and schools of the complexity of factors at play in the issue of out-of-school children and the need for recognising, beyond personal and family factors, the responsibility of the system (education, health, child protection, social protection) when inadequately responding to these needs. There was also a shared understanding that the improvement of the identification mechanism for out-of-school children would result in an increase of unveiled cases in the short term.

Political will. The pilot has been strongly backed up by the Ministry of Education and Science, as well as the Governor of Lori Marz, whose support has been critical throughout

implementation. A key contribution of the Governor has been to repeatedly send clear messages to schools and municipalities regarding the imperative to report adequately on cases of children out of school. These messages were consistently reinforced by all Marz heads of Departments.

Social Work. Case managers have enabled the deployment of a coordinated response mechanism comprising a holistic assessment of the family situation of children out of school, the creation of a support network to address children's needs and the sharing of responsibilities for supporting the reintegration of children into school. The Case Management method has also enabled a flexible approach towards each case and the development of creative solutions responding to their specificities.

Main challenges

Data inaccuracy has been the greatest challenge of this pilot. Human errors when recording information on children whether manually or electronically, such as spelling mistakes in names and errors in date of birth have required manual checking of hundreds of children's records.

Lessons learned

The activities conducted in Lori Marz have generated useful lessons learned.

1. Combining the identification of children out of school and an absenteeism reporting mechanism in a single protocol enables to raise awareness about school absenteeism management and the role of absenteeism in the drop out process.
2. Entering data accurately in all registers, whether school, health or municipality-based eases the process of triangulation of children's records.
3. Providing stakeholders with electronic templates for reporting data on children

increases the chance that data will be submitted in the correct format.

4. Identifying 6 years old at risk of not entering Grade 1 at the correct age must be done in the spring before the start of the academic year. This way, awareness raising activities can take place with parents and they are on time to enrol their child before the start of the academic year. Phase 2 of the pilot adopted this approach yielding positive results on the timely enrolment of children compared to Phase 1 when this activity was conducted in September.
5. Requiring that schools contact polyclinics systematically when a child is absent for 3 days for health reasons without submitting a medical certificate generates significant workload for school and polyclinic staff.
6. Requiring that schools contact the Coordination Council systematically when a child is absent for 3 days for reasons other than health places unrealistic expectations on the capacity of the Council to follow-up on all these cases.
7. Adopting a Case Management system for children identified as out of school ensures that coordination is undertaken by one responsible person who has authority to liaise with all other parties, who has access to confidential information about the child and the family and who has the ability to refer children or their families to a range of services and professionals.
8. Providing avenues for NGOs to contribute to the identification and referral of cases of children out of school is necessary.

Implications for a national scale-up

There are a number of implications should the mechanism piloted in Lori be scaled up nationally.

On education regulations and strategies

The following issues would require clarification:

- The definition of what constitutes an authorised and an unauthorised absence from school based on a list of valid reasons for absence;
- The role and responsibilities of schools in identifying children at-risk of dropping out and in organising early interventions for drop-out prevention;
- The role of the Inspectorate in assessing: (i) the compliance of schools to absenteeism recording and absenteeism management, (ii) the efforts of schools in providing school reintegration support to former out-of-school children, (iii) the efforts of schools in implementing drop-out prevention and early response measures;
- The role of the School Management Information System in recording children out of school and in identifying children who have dropped out from school (e.g. during a school transfer);
- The strategy to be adopted by the Ministry of Education to mitigate the possible increase in drop out rate following: (i) the transition from 9 to 12 years of compulsory education; (ii) the early implementation of the deinstitutionalisation reform when community-services and mainstream schools might not be able to respond adequately to the varied needs of children;
- Whether the identification system of children out of school should be identical across Marz and cities or whether room for adaptation is necessary;
- The type and enforcement methods of legislation on parental responsibility for children's schooling;
- The type and enforcement methods of legislation on the State responsibility to

provide an education that is appropriate to each child.

On the functions and work of Case Managers and other social workers

Implications on the definition of the role and functions of Case Managers under the Integrated Social Services reform would include:

- The content and type of training required for Case Managers to successfully engage with dysfunctional families and with vulnerable children and teenagers;
- The nature and scope of the family or child assessment(s) conducted by Case Managers when a child is identified as out-of-school;

On the data collection and information sharing about children

Special attention on how data on children is collected, stored, protected and shared would be required, such as:

- Regulations on the collection, storage and sharing of electronic data on children;
- Access protocols to data generated by the School Management Information System;
- Access protocols to data held in the database of Children with disabilities and in the database of Children in difficult life circumstances;
- Safeguards to prevent loss or leakages of children's data held electronically;
- Data information sharing between civil registry offices and community authorities about new born children.

Recommendations

1. Encourage each sector to maintain accurate electronic records and databases on children, develop cross-sector memorandum of understanding on sharing electronic data and **automate to the extent possible the identification of**

children out of school or children frequently absent from school. Priority areas include: linking the civil registry database with population registers in communities and linking the database on children with disabilities and children in difficult circumstances with the School Management Information System database.

2. Each school should establish a clear **absenteeism management system** and monitor closely the absenteeism of children at risk of dropping out. The referral of children with high levels of absenteeism to external parties such as the Case Managers or the Education Department while necessary, should not place unrealistic demands on staff. Electronic registers would enable schools to accurately identify children who are chronically absent.
3. **Case Managers and other social workers should not be overburdened** with cases that could be solved by other professionals, such as the majority of cases of children delaying their entry in Grade 1.
4. **Mapping existing services for family, children and adolescents** (public, non-governmental and private) would provide useful information to Case Managers, schools and local municipalities when establishing support mechanisms around children at risk of dropping out.
5. There is a need to **strengthen the continuum of services between in-school and after-school provision/services**.
6. **Separate the coordination functions and the case management supervision functions** of the Coordination Council to avoid staff overload.
7. Facilitate **the exchange of best practices** across all staff and schools involved.
8. Develop a **guidance note to support and harmonise the work of Case Managers**

and other social workers when conducting needs assessments and developing Individual Plans for children out of school.



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