

policy brief



WHAT STANDS AT THE CROSSROAD(S)?

INEQUALITIES AT THE INTERSECTIONS IN SOCIAL PROTECTION IN MACEDONIA

– A USER'S PERSPECTIVE –

This policy brief summarises the policy related findings from the research project "(In)equality in social protection: Multi-level analysis of intersectionality in social assistance provision – A comparative study". The research project was conducted in the period August 2014 – July 2015 by the European Policy Institute - Skopje, Macedonia and Center for Social Research - Analitika, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Content

Executive summary	2
Social protection as a key function of the state	4
Why intersectionality-based approach to policy making?	6
The users' perspective: basic needs, coping strategies and barriers for satisfying these	8
1. Insufficient and late financial assistance	
2. Utilities and other bills	
3. Questionable affordability, availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of state institutions and services	
4. Invasive and punitive	
5. Discrimination when approaching state institutions	
Policy recommendations	16

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If the social protection system is to respond to the real needs of its users or ought to be users and to truly bring and keep them out of poverty, their lived experiences and opinions need to be taking into account. This response needs to take into account the differences in experiences of exclusion and disadvantage which go beyond a single axis. Not all women, or persons with disabilities, or LGBTIQ persons, or persons from any other 'group' demarcated by a personal characteristic or status do not suffer the same exclusion and disadvantage. By wiping out these differences stemming from the reality of the lived experiences from policy making, the social protection system's potential to achieve its aims is substantially weakened as it fails to target the real needs and sources of exclusion and disadvantage. Aiming to put forward a users' perspective on social protection, we conducted a qualitative research which looked into their¹ lived experiences, identifying their basic needs and coping strategies. We then compared these findings to the legal and policy framework.

We conclude that the present, social protection system in Macedonia fails to achieve its aims. The acknowledg-

ment and visibility of the differences in the lived experiences of persons on grounds of gender, body, race and class is in a nascent stage. Laws and policies largely fail to identify and spell these out in a way which will move beyond a single axis approach, and which will prescribe specific measures and actions to address the potential sources of inequalities, i.e. points of exclusion, disadvantage and discrimination.

The needs of users or ought to be users of the social protection system remain largely under-met. There is a general and predominant dissatisfaction with the system. The provision of services is considered to be of very low quality and the capacities of institutions and persons responsible for providing of social protection are considered questionable. Overall – not only the system does not reach the persons in greatest need of social protection, but

INTERSECTIONALITY

A system of "interactions between inequality-creating social structures, symbolic representations and identity constructions that are context-specific, topic-orientated and inextricably linked to social praxis".

Gabriele Winker and Nina Degele, "Intersectionality as multi-level analysis: Dealing with social inequality", *European Journal of Women's Studies* Vol.18 No.1 (2011): 54.

¹ Interviewees were selected and contacted through a combination of assistance by key informants (CSOs, charity organizations) referrals made by persons who share or know of others that might match the study focus.

it is also perceived and experienced as discriminatory, punitive, unjust, corrupt, inaccessible, while procedures are evaluated as expensive, lengthy and complicated and the social services largely as either lacking or inaccessible.

The financially poorest of our interviewees lack access to food, housing, healthcare, transportation and physical and sensory accessibility. Food insecurity stands out as the most pressing concern, with many of our interviewees reporting eating only one meal per day, frequently provided in soup kitchens which means lack of food during weekends. Their lives are an every-day struggle to make ends meet and to secure livelihood for themselves and their families. Although the financial assistance is assessed as late and insufficient, it is still a desirable and necessary coping strategy for all of our interviewees. The social protection system also fails to identify many of the other burning needs such as hygiene, baby products, rest and leisure, mental and sexual health, and so on. The needs of persons with disabilities and of their families remain grossly unmet, and their lives filled with stigma and exclusion.

In order to address these issues, we put forward a list of recommendations which is a compilation of recommendations compiled by our interviewees themselves – persons that are or ought to be users of the social protection system. Some refer to more general issues, whereas others raise more specific ones. Recommendations made by our research team are included throughout the text of the brief itself, and they often overlap with those issued by our interviewees. We highlight here just

one recommendation: An open, participatory and transparent process of discussions about what kind of social protection Macedonia needs and how this can be best achieved must be opened on a national level. A political consensus must be reached for opening

WHERE OUR DATA COMES FROM

- 33 Interviews with persons that are or ought to be users of the social protection system (January-March 2015)
- Focus group with non-recipients
- Analysis of media articles
- Critical review of existing literature

such a process, and the process itself must remain void of political abuse. In this process, the voices of the users or ought to be users of the social protection system must be heard and their lived experiences must be taken into account. In addition, we recommend conducting a study on possibilities for introducing intersectionality to policy making which would include lessons learned from other national process with well assessed potential for policy transplants' success or failure.

SOCIAL PROTECTION AS A KEY FUNCTION OF THE STATE (ESPECIALLY) IN DETERIORATING ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

In Macedonia there are high unemployment rates, lower living standard, and increased exposure to social vulnerability of many of its citizens. Almost one quarter of Macedonia's population lives in poverty, according to the World Bank.² According to other sources, the numbers reach 30.9%. The percentage of unemployment in 2015 has been calculated as 25.5%. Women earn 12.5% less for work of equal value, and the gap increases as the education level decreases; namely, it goes up to 28.4% for persons without formal education or with primary education. For job of equal value, with same experience and education, a women would be paid 17.3% less than a man would.³ In 2014, there were 133.539 registered members of households receiving social assistance cash benefit.

High number of closed jobs in the transition, lack of new jobs and lack of skills for employment of persons that would match the newly set requirements of the market all coupled with a decline of the welfare state. The latter seems to be



"You can see the level of poverty by the waste which people leave behind."

*Ramiz, waste collector, father,
11 members household*

in types, scope and quality of social services (such as sexual and reproductive health services, job seeking assistance, services for persons with disabilities, or for the elderly).

This can be traced by following the amendments of laws and bylaws in the field of social protection. As a result, social needs and social risks further increased, making social cleavages deeper, thus also giving rise to the need for social protection and responsibility from the state to provide for it. In addition, legal uncertainty increased, which can be seen both by the number of legislative changes a single act is subjected to within a year, as well as overall. For example, the Law on Social Protection was adopted in June 2009 and it has already been amended seventeen times.⁴

Regardless of this context, few studies have engaged with the lived experiences of persons living on the margins of society. This leaves the complexity of their personal circumstances and their needs/risks not investigated nor included in laws and policies.

² World Bank, "Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population)" <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC/countries/MK?display=graph>

³ Source: Finance Think, EdPlako application. <http://www.ed-plako.mk/истражувања/>

⁴ Law on Social Protection, Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 79/09, 36/11, 51/11, 166/12, 15/13, 79/13, 164/13, 187/13, 44/14, 116/14, 180/14, 33/15, 72/15, 104/15, 150/15, 173/15, 192/15; Constitutional Court decision: 07.04.2010.

SINGLE AXIS APPROACH

Laws and policies are predominantly following the single axis approach. This means that they bring persons down to a single personal characteristic or status, failing to take into consideration the potential complexities and the contextual issues stemming from the nuances inside a characteristic or status, and furthermore – form their intersections.

The treatment of personal characteristics or statuses under law as protected grounds can give rise to many debates, such as which grounds to protect, why, with what scope, what interplay with other grounds, in which fields, by whom, and, finally, whether the intersections. All of these debates must find their place in policy making. Their importance is further increased when one takes into account what has been described as “simplistic appeals to what is ‘natural’, to biology [...] naturalness of common sense”⁵. Complex social differences can be both accounted for or denied via an appeal to “nature”, which is highly appealing to the common sense, but should not have room in social policy making because, as Gaine rightfully notes, “the seductive ease with which [naturalness of common sense] explains social phenomena is what can make it most oppressive”⁶.

This is the case with Macedonia. Sexual orientation and gender identity⁷

have been forced out of the provision on protected grounds in the ADL by, inter alia, invoking such simplistic appeals and naturalness of common sense. Posing heterosexuality as the “natural” and biologically “right” and morally justifiable attraction to the opposite sex, automatically renders homosexual, bisexual asexual persons as unnatural, and going contrary to biology. As this was further underscored by religion as part of “nature”, the situation got additionally aggravated.

The bare minimum of legal protection on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity must be provided under law immediately, and should be followed by further work on alignment of other laws and policies as well as on introducing measures to rectify previous history of inequality for persons which are of sexual orientation other than heterosexual and persons with a non-conforming gender identity. There is ample evidence for policy changes in this direction.⁸

5 Chris Gaine, “Conclusion”, in Chris Gaine et al (ed) *Equality and Diversity in Social Work Practice* (Learning Matters, 2010), 116.

6 Ibid.

7 Understood as per the Yogyakarta Principles: Yogyakarta Principles. Yogyakarta Principles Website. <http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles_en.htm>. 18.02.2016. See also: “Initiative Article 3 [Иницијатива Член 3]”, <http://coalition.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/merged_document.pdf>, Last accessed: 18.02.2016

8 Some of the more recent ones: The country paper on which this policy brief is based contains such evidence: Biljana Kotevska et al, *The Art of Survival: Intersecting Inequalities in Social Protection in Macedonia – Results of an Empirical Enquiry* (European Policy Institute – Skopje, 2016). Evidence on LGBTI persons across ethnicities in Macedonia can be founds in the cross-sectional mixed methods study: Kristefer Stojanovski, et al, “‘It Is One, Big Loneliness for Me’: The Influences of Politics and Society on Men Who Have Sex with Men and Transwomen in Macedonia” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, (2015). The most recent research report containing findings from surveyed LGBTI persons provides detailed information on, inter alia, social protection. See: Kocho Andonovski et al, *Analysis of the problems and needs of LGBTI persons in the Republic of Macedonia in the fields social protection, legal services and police conduct* [Анализа на проблемите и потребите на ЛГБТИ луѓето во Република Македонија во областа на социјалната заштита, правните услуги и полициското постапување] (LGBT Centre of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights of the Republic of Macedonia, 2016). For arguments for legislative amendments of the ADL by adding sexual orientation and gender identity see: “Initiative Article 3 [Иницијатива Член 3]”, <http://coalition.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/merged_document.pdf>, Last accessed: 18.02.2016 The same in a wider context, calling for internal harmonization of the national equality and non-discrimination legislation in the country, can be found in: Biljana Kotevska, *Analysis of the harmonization of national equality and non-discrimination legislation* (upcoming – 2016; OSCE and CPAD). In addition, one can also refer to reports from IGOs, including the European Union.

The legislative approach to inequalities has advanced only to the point where provisions on multiple discrimination are included in laws, however without putting in place mechanisms or guarantees for identification and addressing of multiple discrimination.

It should also be noted that the overall evaluation of the national social protection policy on this issue is “nascent stage” as some of the policies do take several personal characteristics or statuses into consideration. However, the intersections and interconnectedness of these remains unexplained. Thus, both national and international assessments have concluded that the inclusion of the socially vulnerable and/or persons with disabilities in the country has not improved.⁹

WHY INTERSECTIONALITY-BASED APPROACH TO POLICY MAKING?

Intersectionality prevents reducing people to single characteristics, enables accurate understanding of lived experiences but also of social locations and categories and how they are constructed.¹⁰ In addition, intersectionality aids recognizing and understanding the ongoing social processes and existing structures and how these are shaped under the impact of power relations.

⁹ European Commission, Macedonia 2015 Report (10.11.2015) <http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf>. Last accessed: 18.02.2016

¹⁰ Olena Hankivsky (ed) An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis Framework (Vancouver, BC: Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy, Simon Fraser University, 2012), 17.

WHAT CAN INTERSECTIONALITY HELP POLICY MAKERS DO?

- To make inequalities visible and explicit
- To include a wide range of multiple inequality categories
- To articulate the dynamics between these categories
- To demonstrate a structural understanding of the existing power relations¹¹, their workings and complexities
- To show awareness of and challenge privileges and inequalities, including those present in existing policies and laws
- To avoid stigmatization of persons and groups at points of intersections
- To increase consultation and participation of civil society actors in policy making.¹²

¹¹ Such as of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and so on, as working on their own and as interlocking systems of oppression.

¹² Lombardo and Agustin (2009), as summarized in Olena Hankivsky (ed) An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis Framework (Vancouver, BC: Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy, Simon Fraser University, 2012), 18.

HOW CAN POLICY MAKERS INTRODUCE AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH IN POLICY MAKING?

1. BY INTRODUCING THE FOLLOWING GUIDING PRINCIPLES¹³:

Guiding principles

- Work with intersecting categories
- Analyse multiple levels
- Pay attention to power at the symbolic, structural and individual level
- Introduce reflexivity practice as part of efforts to acknowledge existing power relations
- Recognize importance of time and space on the shaping of lived experiences
- Draw from diverse knowledge(s) of all persons concerned with the policies
- Aim for social justice, especially towards transforming the way resources and relationships are produced
- Mind the principle of equity as fairness

2. BY ASKING ALL OF THE FOLLOWING DESCRIPTIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE QUESTIONS¹⁴ IN POLICY MAKING PROCESSES:

Descriptive questions

- What knowledge, values and experiences do you bring to this area of policy analysis?
- What is the policy 'problem' under consideration?
- How have representations of the 'problem' come about?
- How are groups differentially affected by this representation of the 'problem'?
- What are the current policy responses to the 'problem'?

Transformative questions

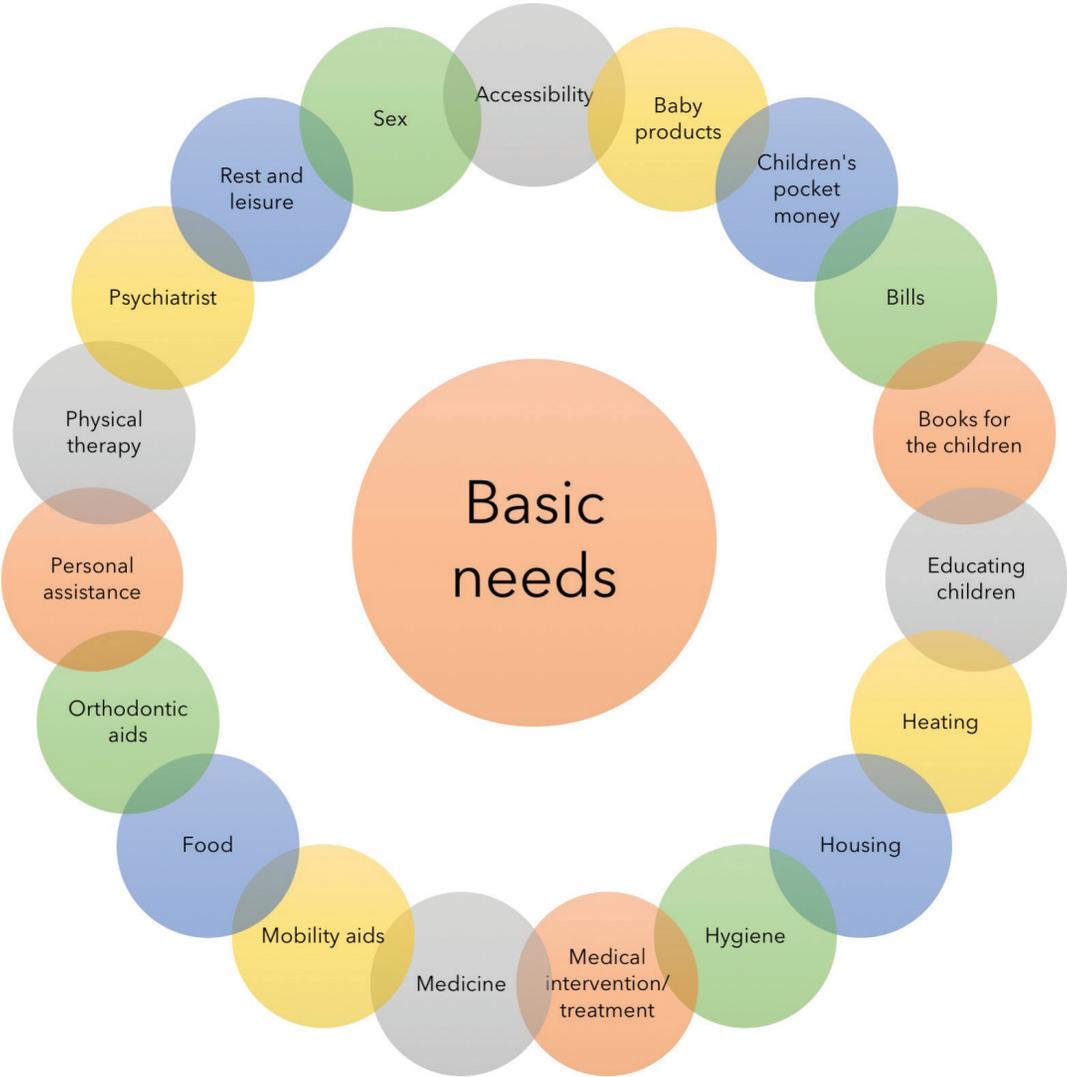
- What inequities actually exist in relation to the 'problem'?
- Where and how can interventions be made to improve the 'problem'?
- What are feasible short, medium and long-term solutions?
- How will proposed policy responses reduce inequities?
- How will implementation and uptake be assured?
- How will you know if inequities have been reduced?
- How has the process of engaging in an intersectionality- based policy analysis transformed:
 - Your thinking about relations and structures of power and inequity?
 - The ways in which you and others engage in the work of policy development, implementation and evaluation?
 - Broader conceptualizations, relations and effects of power asymmetry in the everyday world?

¹³ As proposed in: Olena Hankivsky (ed) An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis Framework (Vancouver, BC: Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy, Simon Fraser University, 2012).

¹⁴ Source for list of questions: Olena Hankivsky (ed) An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis Framework (Vancouver, BC: Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy, Simon Fraser University, 2012). The readers are kindly directed to the original work for a full and more detailed list of questions.

THE USERS' PERSPECTIVE: BASIC NEEDS, COPING STRATEGIES AND BARRIERS FOR SATISFYING THESE

Figure No.1 Needs of the interviewees



"We haven't received social assistance in two-three months already. And when they finally decide to send money, it's only for one month, not for three. It happens very often. Sometimes I find myself in a situation where I cannot buy medicines for my child."

Petra, mother of child with intellectual disability

1. INSUFFICIENT AND LATE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

All interviewees raised the issue of a very low/insufficient amount of financial social assistance, or as stated by one of our interviewees: “You can barely survive on social assistance, let alone live a decent life.” A deeper look into the structural level shows that this criticism is qualified.

“If the prices go up, the income should also go up, wouldn’t you say?”
Orhan

Namely, if we start from an average monthly value of the social assistance, which is 50 EUR, and then take into consideration that the average net salary in the country is 350 EUR, and that the monthly consumer basket for a household of four members is 500 EUR, it is clear that the amount is very small.

“I can’t ask for assistance which will be the level of a salary. But at least 100 eu-

“I had to deal with a bailiff, even though I submitted a request for the State to cover my debts. I had to give 11 0000 denars to pay the electricity bill. I have no money, how can I pay?”

Dragana, person with a physical disability, social assistance recipient, single household

*ros.. At last 6.000 denars...
You know what I mean?
To achieve at least some
level of social security...”*
Jadranka

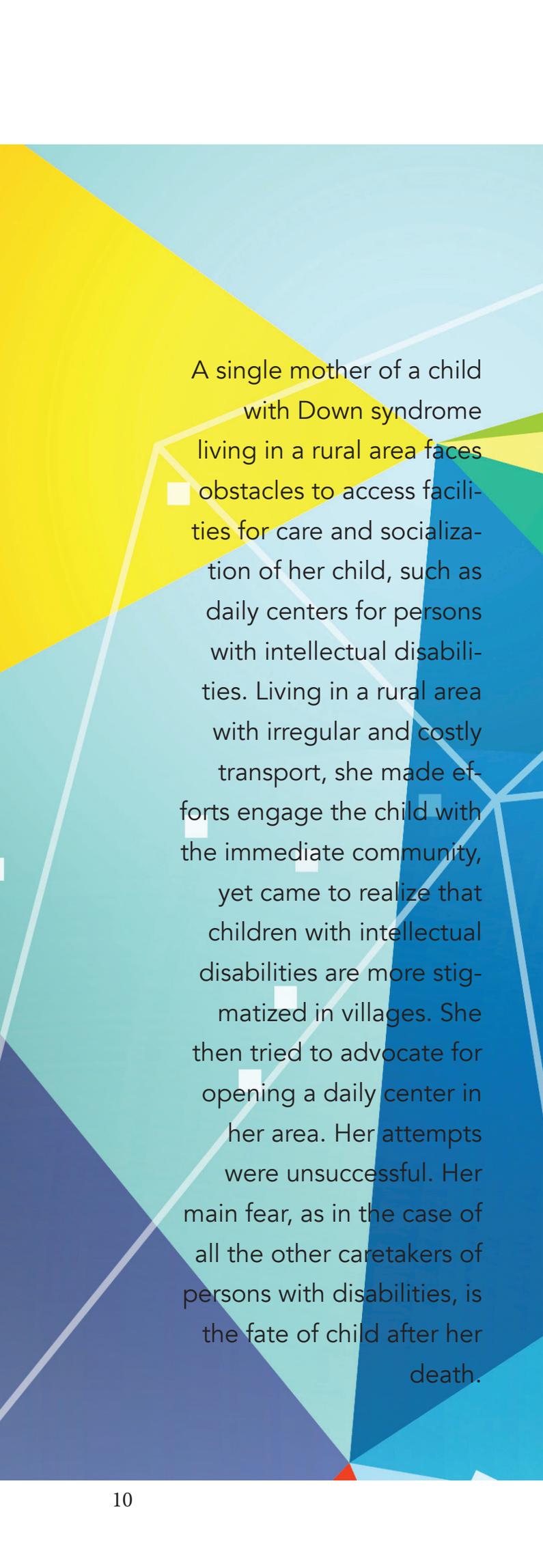
Aside from being insufficient, social assistance is frequently late, as can also be read in the excerpt from the interview with a mother and caretaker of a person with disability.

2. UTILITIES AND OTHER BILLS

Although the State widely publicised a campaign and politicians boasted to provide persons receiving social assistance with coverage of utilities expenses (electricity, water) and coverage of past debt (bank loans and overdue bills), it is clear from the interviews and from media reports that actually persons still do receive these bills, and that they are not actually paid by the state.

“[The State] should consider raising the assistance at least a bit in the months when they know our expences go higher [means during winter].”
Jadranka

Also that persons have received warrants and have faced visits from bailiffs because of unpaid debts, although they have filed requests for debts-coverage by the state, as can be seen from Dragana’s experience (see quote). Aside from stress and burdensome administration, this also means additional costs for them.



A single mother of a child with Down syndrome living in a rural area faces obstacles to access facilities for care and socialization of her child, such as daily centers for persons with intellectual disabilities. Living in a rural area with irregular and costly transport, she made efforts engage the child with the immediate community, yet came to realize that children with intellectual disabilities are more stigmatized in villages. She then tried to advocate for opening a daily center in her area. Her attempts were unsuccessful. Her main fear, as in the case of all the other caretakers of persons with disabilities, is the fate of child after her death.

3. QUESTIONABLE AFFORDABILITY, AVAILABILITY, ACCESSIBILITY, ACCEPTABILITY AND QUALITY OF STATE INSTITUTIONS AND SERVICES

The cost of administrative procedures overall, as well as their duration, cause burden on the users or ought to be users of the social protection system. Given that the monthly average amount of the assistance, as stated above, is around 50 EUR, and that the lowest administrative tax for processing of one document is 0.9 euro cents.

“You will pay more for the documents than what you will get as assistance”

Dragana

Moreover, as the offices where these procedures can be completed are usually based only in the centers of towns and in the capital, it means that persons living further away and those living in rural areas are additionally exposed to direct expenses - travel and meals, but also indirect expenses – covering care for persons left back at home, losing days of grey economy work, health problems/additional burden arising from travel, etc.

“Too many documents for very little money”

Jadranka

Administrative procedures seem to be additionally burdening from a sensory and physical accessibility perspective, but also for persons that struggle with literacy or that face language barriers,

as well as for persons with psycho-social disabilities. As noted by one of our interviewees with physical disability:

“I need to go to Public Revenue Office, but I cannot get there. There are stairs in front of you, you see everyone running around, and you cannot, and it bothers you. It doesn’t only bother you, it kills you on the inside.” Fatmir

“There is no special office or counter for persons with disabilities. There should be a special access. Someone will let me take their place in the line, but other will say ‘I am waiting for half an hour, so should you’.” Senada

“I have been in an accessible public bathroom for persons with disabilities, and I would like to see more of that.” Jadranka

“You can’t go easily up the stairs with crutches. [...] It is not easy at all.” Drita

The recipients have reported additional needs for support from the state that span beyond purely financial support. These include as can be seen above from the table personal assistance, mostly reported as a need of persons with disabilities, or carers of persons/ children with disabilities. Parents of children with disabilities have also reported lack of services in general and lack of geographical distribution of

day centres as one of their key barriers. Quality of the services provided has also been brought under question.

*“I do not see why I need to go and pick up the document for continuation of the social assistance. They know where I live, they have my address. Why don’t they just send the letter in an envelope? [...] The State must add a note somewhere in all those documents that it is a person with disabilities, and that the money must be given to them on hand.”
Jadranka*

*“The State needs to pay for someone to go and help in the families where they have persons using wheelchairs, as they can’t do everything by themselves.”
Sasho*

*“The medical personal should be more skilled and should help people more.”
Fatmir*

There is an overwhelming degree of worry among parents of children with disabilities over the future of their children after they pass away.

“I just wish I knew that when my wife and I die he will have where to go, you know, that he will have a room a bathroom, somewhere to stay.” Stefan

“Another parent of daughter with schizophrenia is considering signing a contract with someone that will take care of their daughter until she passes away, and inherit their house in exchange.” Sasho

“Another parent said this is her biggest nightmare, as she knows that once she passes away there will be no one to take care of her son.” Marina

There is lack of appropriate services and/or reactions of the social protection system in general when it comes to persons that abuse alcohol. This results in families carrying the whole burden and developing coping strategies, while the system remains unconcerned.

4. INVASIVE AND PUNITIVE

Social assistance recipients that receive any funds on their bank accounts and/or via wire-transfer (including from remittances) get their social assistance discontinued. Although it is clear that they cannot live on 50 EUR per month (the average amount of social assistance), the discontinuing has gone forward. This has been seen as an unjust measure. This has also raised the criticism of the system as punitive, invasive and that it stimulates inactivity and passiveness. As a single mother recipient of permanent financial assistance noted: “the system makes me feel as a victim, as if I’m incapable to do anything,

even though I’m active 24/7”. Similarly, another interviewee with physical disability explained: “I am physically incapable to work, but I can write an article or a poem and get some money for it.” The interviewees state that they feel trapped, as they cannot work anywhere for small amounts as they used to, because it will cost them their assistance.

*“As if we are chained,
you know – control [...] It beats you and does not allow you to cry; [...] You are not allowed to live, men, just to live. You know, I have this constant feeling of a rope being tied around my neck [...] you want to live but someone stretches that rope.”
Dragana*

Moreover, if the state finds that they have been receiving other funds, it will not only discontinue the assistance, but make them return all money which they have received as social assistance after having received the money from someone else. This is exemplified by the lived experience presented in Box No.2. In addition, another interviewee shared her lived experience on how this monitoring and punishment happens in reality:

“[Social services employees] showed up for one of their unannounced check ups and saw me patching up an old pair of pants on the sewing machine. They discontinued my assistance immediately because

apparently I was making additional money by sewing for other people. The sewing machine was for personal use only; I didn't sew for other people!"
Jadranka

This was additionally burdened with the retroactive application of this by-law, which, although entered into force on January 01, 2015, is applied as being in force since the date of adoption, which was back in 2013. This resulted in discontinuing the assistance of many, and moreover in the state requesting that they return the money they have received for almost two years. The legal uncertainty issue that this raises is further aggravated by frequent changes of laws.

5. DISCRIMINATION WHEN APPROACHING STATE INSTITUTIONS

One of the most noted forms of discrimination in relation to the actions of the state institutions is the lack of reasonable accommodation, noted above. This is an outlawed form of discrimination under national law, however still seems to be present in the public, as well as in the private sector.

Tied to lack of reasonable accommodation is discrimination of persons with disabilities in the field of employment. The general employment criteria "general health condition" remains unspecified and is applied without personalization. This poses obstacles for accessing jobs in the public sector for persons

Following a car accident, a person with acquired disability obtained permanent financial assistance. He is a father of three children, all of them students. After receiving funds on this bank account through wire-transfer, not only his assistance was discontinued, but he was also obliged to return the financial assistance he received thus far.

with disabilities from the start. Also, the list of disabilities as to what accounts for a disability at the national level remains unrevised and, regardless of the ratification of the International Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a medical approach to disability both in law and in fact seem to be still prevailing, with some forms of disability escaping the radar at the national level.

Aside from one public add for employment of persons with disabilities, and a failed practice of operation of shelter companies, all encompassing exclusion of persons seems to be present thus preventing persons to take an active role in social life. This results with overall exclusion and discrimination of persons in the country in all fields.

However, it should be noted that in October 2014 a draft-law on employment of persons with disabilities, which is to replace the old law, has been put up for public discussions.¹⁵ This law foresees mandatory employment of persons with disabilities. One of our interviewees recommended that “[T]here should be a law that for each 30 employees each enterprise will employ one person with disabilities. And if they do not respect this, they must pay fines.” It remains to be seen from the results of the public discussions whether the law will apply to both the private and public sector or just to the public sector and shelter companies.

Lookism was also noted in the lived experiences of our interviewees, as physical appearance is a source of dis-

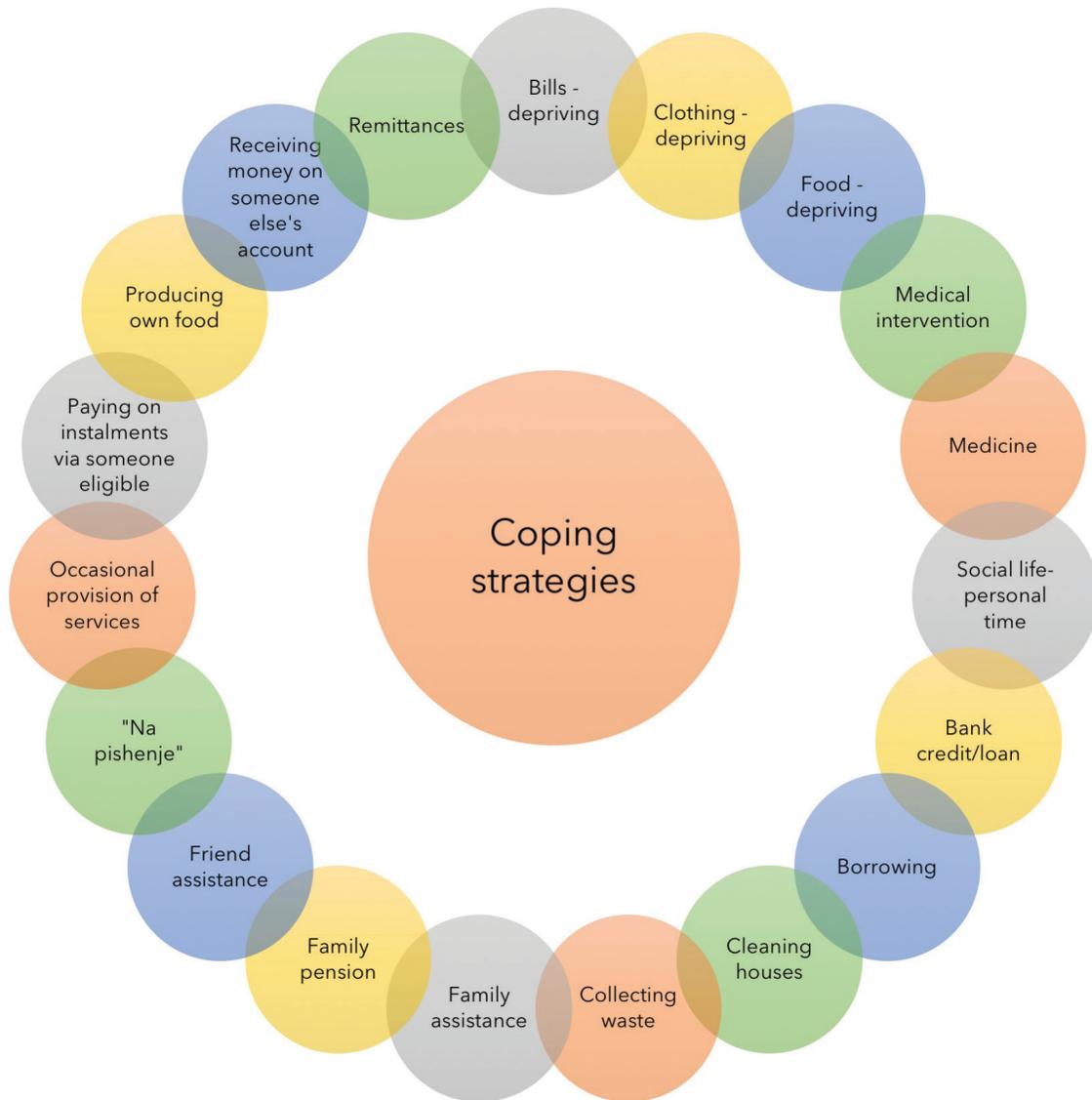
crimination. A single mother with a small child and a Roma father and sex worker have both been told they are too well dressed to receive assistance by the social services. Accused of carrying diseases and “trying to get everyone sick”, a homeless person has been thrown out of social services premises. The same person was asked by social service worker “why are you coming everyday, like a “gypsy”, constantly asking for something”.

Social services employees have openly ridiculed a Roma transgender sex-worker in her attempt to obtain social assistance. As most of the poorest persons our sample, she faces mistreatment by persons who are supposed to provide help. In addition, when trying to report violence by a client or by someone else, she is asked by police “what did you do to provoke him” (Stasha). Another Roma complained of lack of support by the State for her effort to take custody over her niece after her sister died and overall lack of support subsequently for her efforts to educate her and her other children.

“Why didn’t the State help me with custody over my niece? And with her bringing up? For clothes at least... I do not allow neither her nor any of my children to beg. My children go to school. The State should see and acknowledge that [...] and should help me create better conditions for my children. But they are not.” Lutvija

¹⁵ The draft law has still not entered parliamentary procedure and due to the current political crisis it is not possible to foresee when it will enter and/or be adopted

Figure No.2 Coping strategies of the interviewees



The above clearly suggests that staff working with the most marginalized groups in society lacks education and sensitivity towards their needs. Moreover, instead of acting to assist them in the realisation of their rights and alleviation of their worries, and instead of providing them assistance to meet their needs, persons working in the state institutions are frequently the very source of discrimination for our interviewees.

Ageism seems to present be as well, with a lot of persons noting that elder persons are not capable of work, and indirectly in the omnipresent claim that "young people are not hired, so how do you expect elderly to be?"



"The State should not be here to finish you off, but to create conditions for you to exist and thrive."

Stefan, father of a child with disability

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on their lived experiences, basic needs and coping strategies, the interviewees in this study gave the following recommendations:

- Increase the amount of social assistance benefits to allow for better quality of life and tie it to the consumer basket;
- Make procedures affordable and less time-consuming; avoid unnecessary bureaucracy;
- Make the system overall to be less restrictive in terms of requirements for continuing the social assistance provision;
- Improve physical and sensory accessibility for persons with disabilities and secure provision of reasonable accommodation;
- Allow conditions for formal economic activation of users of the social protection system and lift ban on any financially gainful activity for persons receiving permanent financial assistance;
- Improve employment measures for persons with disabilities;
- Take measures to identify persons in need of social protection and better target the policies and with it the assistance and the measures;
- Improve accessibility in rural areas, including by providing free public transport for caretakers of persons with disabilities;
- Scholarships for children from underprivileged families, encouraging life-long learning and vocational training for persons in social risk and in social need;
- Encourage greater social acceptance of persons with disabilities, single mothers, domestic violence survivors, transgender persons, sex workers, homeless persons;
- Strengthen the capacities of social service employees to work with various groups of underprivileged persons, particularly through sensitivity training;
- Provide additional services for single parents and caretakers of persons with disabilities; such as home care services, daily care centres on local level, extended day care services; and
- Assist the securing of basic housing conditions, shelters for homeless persons, particularly in the winter season.