**SUMMARY**

**ANALYSIS OF THE POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING THE PHENOMENON OF BULLYING IN SCHOOLS**

School violence, in all its forms, is an infringement of the children's rights to education, health and well-being. No quality and equitable education can be provided, if adolescents face violence in the school environment. School violence can manifest as sporadic actions or as repeated intimidation, degrading treatment and harassment.

According to the study on „Bullying among adolescents in the Republic of Moldova", conducted by **UNICEF Moldova** in 2019, 86.8% of the total number of 6th -12th graders are affected by bullying. The report highlighted that adolescents involved in bullying situations as aggressors, victims or witnesses are more prone to absenteeism, school dropout and have low academic performance. Aggressors or victims of bullying are more likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety, have low self-esteem, feel lonely and may lose interest in any activity.

According to this study, a system of services for preventing and combating violence were established in the Republic of Moldova, which currently require adjustment based on the new social reality.

Currently, in schools and establishments that provide services to victims, aggressors and their families there is no system for recording and documenting the bullying situations. A significant number of educational institutions are not prepared for preventing or combating bullying. Most ANET (child abuse, neglect, exploitation and trafficking) coordinators stated that they do not have clear guidelines on the measures to be taken in case of bullying, nor human and methodological resources for preventing this phenomenon, particularly the online bullying.

Being aware of the existing challenges, **Terre des Hommes Moldova** is implementing the Project *Joint Efforts to Combat Bullying in Moldova*, with the support of **UNICEF Moldova**. The Project is in line with the recommendations of the Study on "Bullying among adolescents in the Republic of Moldova", conducted by UNICEF in 2019, and with the Roadmap to accelerate ending of violence against children in the Republic of Moldova 2019-2025, and it aims to contribute to preventing and combating bullying in schools of the Republic of Moldova.

To achieve its objectives, the Project outlined a combination of activities - policy analysis, capacity building for professionals, youth empowerment and awareness-raising on prevention and interventions in situations of bullying. Combined, these efforts are meant to prevent violence against children, to enhance the social norms and to generate an evidence-based and context-specific model for primary prevention endeavours in Moldova.

In this context, Tdh Moldova conducted a situational analysis of the current policies, practices and tools in the field of prevention, identification and intervention in case of violence, with a special emphasis on bullying and on the existing services, barriers and policy recommendations to overcome them. The following objectives were set aiming to achieve this goal:

✓ Conduct a documentary research, an analysis of the regulatory framework for the prevention, identification and intervention in case of violence, with a special emphasis on bullying;

✓ Develop a comprehensive report on the current policies, practices and tools for prevention, identification and intervention in case of violence, with a special emphasis on bullying and the existing services, barriers/challenges;

✓ Collect descriptive and analytical information on the degree of achievement of the Project's objectives from the perspective of the results obtained;

✓ Determine the effectiveness, the impact, the relevance and the sustainability of the planned activities;

✓ Present the evaluation findings, the main conclusions, the recommendations and the lessons learned, aiming at further sustainable policy development on the bullying segment.

A mixed approach was used for the analysis - both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were applied. This approach was chosen in order to emphasize the strengths of both methods and to collect as complex, accurate and representative data, as possible.

The structure of the analysis includes six chapters, as follows:

**Chapter I**. Definition of bullying, consisting of 2 subchapters: International approaches/experts, research, child rights protection establishments and Approaches within the national regulatory framework in the Republic of Moldova. This chapter highlighted the need for a single definition of the concept of bullying, with a description of its forms, to be used within this analysis and to be taken into account for changing the regulatory framework in order to include the concept of bullying, as well as to be used by the community of professionals in this field. Moreover, after defining the concept of bullying and its forms by the experts in this field, a review of the description of the bullying forms in the Teacher's Guide for Personal Development subject shall be conducted.

**Chapter II**. The regulatory framework for preventing violence in school environment, with a special emphasis on bullying. This chapter focuses on the situational analysis of the current policies, practices and tools in the field of violence prevention, identification and interventions, with a special emphasis on bullying, including on the barriers and policy recommendations for overcoming them in order to accelerate ending of violence against children in the Republic of Moldova, particularly in the school environment. As a conclusion of this sub-chapter, it shall be emphasized that, indeed, there is a broad set of regulatory acts for the situations when professionals should involve in preventing and managing issues related to school violence. This opinion is shared by most specialists working in local specialized authorities in the field of education/managers of educational institutions in the 30 administrative-territorial units where Tdh operates, who stated that "There are sufficient legislative acts and the issuance of new legislative acts will not solve the bullying situations in schools"; "MECR developed a series of very good legislative acts. They must be respected and implemented".

**Chapter III**. The tools for implementing the regulatory framework in the field of violence prevention in schools, with an emphasis on bullying. From the perspective of this analysis, more interventions or synergies are needed, so that any child enjoys a safe school environment. One of the basic statements is that of the specialists working in local specialized authorities in the field of education/managers of educational institutions who pointed out that, although we talk about bullying in

schools, this issue also concerns other community stakeholders - "*it is difficult to implement, there is need for a complex approach by a multidisciplinary committee, with the involvement of all education stakeholders, thus involving the community*", therefore they first of all suggest "*to clearly specify what are the rights and the obligations of each stakeholder involved in solving the bullying cases*" and recommend to strengthen all efforts in this regard.

**Chapter IV**. Stakeholders in this field who are entitled to intervene in situations of violence, with a special emphasis on bullying, pointing out their direct or indirect tasks in this process, and who shall necessarily be involved when discussing the issue under consideration. This chapter notes that a complex, systematic and strategic intervention is needed at the level of each educational institution, because bullying is a group phenomenon and it requires actions to be taken at the individual level (victim, aggressor), at group level (witnesses), along with adult involvement (parents, form masters, teachers, specialists). Thus, the intervention shall focus on several directions: declare zero tolerance to school violence, including to bullying, and develop a Child Protection Policy and institutional practices to prevent and combat abuse.

**Chapter V**. Continuing professional training for the stakeholders within the education system who have responsibilities in this field. This chapter points out that the attitude of a specialist with responsibilities in the field under consideration is one of the key issues in preventing bullying, protecting and providing assistance to those who suffered because of such a behaviour, interdisciplinary and interinstitutional training in this field being paramount. The chapter also analyses the regulatory framework that compels the public authorities/institutions to conduct continuing training and the concerned stakeholders.

The **Conclusions and Recommendations Chapter** points out that the regulatory framework in force is quite fragmented - it is worth noting the existence of a rather imposing set of regulatory acts that provide for actions to prevent and combat violence in educational institutions, but none of them describes the concept of bullying and its forms. Although there is a broad tendency to believe that bullying is a form of violence which does not imply the existence of a conflict based on a real problem, but it is rather based on the wish of some people to gain power and authority, putting the others in a bad light, there is need for differentiating the two concepts, because, against this background, the community stakeholders do not react to bullying, considering it as something normal, as a joke.

Each stakeholder involved in the analysis has his/her own approach to the phenomenon of bullying and involves certain players in preventing and combating school bullying. However, it should be noted that not all players who could contribute to this process are involved. For example, one of the managers of educational institutions pointed out the issue of bullying "related" to the Roma children, but, at the same time, the community mediator is not seen as a partner in this process, moreover, none respondent showed awareness of such a stakeholder. In addition to it, no consideration was given to the role of the media, NGO-s, local/district councils for child rights protection, the territorial offices of the National Council for State-Guaranteed Legal Aid, the Children's Ombudsman and the Minsitry of

Health, Labour and Social Protection. Moreover, the managers of educational institutions noted in this context that teachers are overloaded.

It is also worth noting that, in this quite imposing list of stakeholders, managers of educational institutions almost unanimously stated that they most acutely face the lack of a school psychologist or the services of such a specialist.

There is confusion and ambiguity regarding the stakeholders who have the legal obligation to involve in the process of preventing and combating bullying, as well as unawareness of the rights and obligations of each stakeholder involved in dealing with bullying cases, and it reveals the need to disseminate information about them.

The analysis also pointed out that 9% of the pupil respondents stated they were not aware about cases of bullying in their institution, although anti-bullying activities supported by Tdh are conducted in these schools. Thus, a question arises about the level of awareness in schools where no activities are carried out in this sense or such activities are fragmented.

The analysis also revealed a poor knowledge of the tools for implementing the anti-violence/anti-bullying regulatory framework in schools, most often and most respondents having stated that discussions, parents' meetings or social theatre are the tools used by them. Consequently, on the one hand, there is need for diversifying the tools used, as appropriate, and, on the other hand, for developing partnerships and involving other community stakeholders.

Continuing training, the need for informative materials, permanent monitoring of the situation are among the primary needs specified by the specialists of local specialized authorities in the field of education/managers of educational institutions.

The set of recommendations deriving from the current analysis and suggested by the respondent stakeholders involved in this process broadly concern most community stakeholders and cover all the aspects of preventing and combating bullying. However, given the shortage of human and financial resources, priorities shall be set, so that efficiency is achieved and the sustainability of the system of interventions is ensured.

In this context, we propose to stage the implementation of the above-mentioned recommendations, by developing the necessary tools, depending on their importance.

It is proposed that the following instruments are developed and/or adjusted by the relevant stakeholders during the period 2021-2022:

**Ministry of Education, Culture and Research**:

1. Update Order no.77 and Order no.1049 of 10.10.2014 on the approval of the Procedure for institutional organisation and intervention of the employees of educational institutions in

situations of abuse, neglect, exploitation, child trafficking and include the concept of bullying, the tools for bullying identification, monitoring, reporting, etc.

2. Supplement the Standard Regulations and the Methodological guidelines for the organisation of extracurricular educational institutions with provisions related to preventing violence, including bullying.

3. Develop a Methodological Guide on bullying prevention for educational institutions, jointly with the relevant stakeholders (the methodology for assessing the situation in educational institutions, the intervention/concrete steps in various bullying situations, the clear procedure for recording and intervention in bullying situations, the map of the relevant stakeholders, etc.).

## Local specialised authorities in the field of education

1. Develop clear and explicit anti-bullying procedures in each school, and introduce such provisions in the Child Protection Policy.

2. Report twice a year the cases of bullying, likewise the other forms of violence.

3. Create dedicated space on the online platforms to inform the general public about the phenomenon of bullying, cyberbullying, to give advice to parents, as well as to children/youth on how to react in such situations.

## Managers of educational institutions

1. Supplement the internal Regulations of the educational institution and the Child Protection Policy with bullying-related information.

2. Develop/review the rules of conduct within the institution for pupils, teachers and parents and display them in visible, accessible places.

3. Supplement each employee's job description with provisions related to bullying prevention.

## Civil society

1. Develop a model of programme for working with families with children victims or perpetrators of bullying, etc.

2. Develop a model of mentoring/peer-to-peer programme to enable upper grade pupils to become mentors of younger ones, helping them to develop communication skills needed to overcome conflicts.

3. Provide case studies and good practices, clear examples of bullying situations and the consequences for the aggressor.

4. Develop and provide thematic materials, brochures, posters, video aids, board games, advertisement, motivational videos to be disseminated by the mass-media and used by teachers in their activities with pupils.

5. Carry out information campaigns on the phenomenon of bullying, jointly with the concerned community stakeholders.