



PRESCHOOL EDUCATION A DECADE OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND THE WAY FORWARD



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Introduction

Over the past decade, Albania has undertaken a comprehensive decentralization reform, progressively transferring key public service functions from the central level to local government units. Among these functions, preschool education represents one of the most significant areas of reform, given its role in early childhood development, social inclusion, and family support, as well as the considerable weight it carries in municipal budgets and organizational structures. The legal basis for this transformation was established through Law No. 139/2015 “On Local Self-Government,” while the full implementation of the function was consolidated from 2017 onwards, when municipalities assumed full responsibility for the organization, financing, and management of the service.

This transition represents a fundamental shift from a centralized model to a decentralized system, aimed at improving service quality, efficiency, and responsiveness to local needs. At the same time, however, the process has also brought important challenges related to the clarity of roles between levels of government, the administrative and financial capacities of municipalities, and the need to ensure equal minimum standards for all children, regardless of place of residence.

In this context, the present document aims to analyze the main developments, achievements, and remaining challenges in the decentralization of preschool education in Albania, assessing its implications for service organization, resource allocation, and the quality of service delivery. The analysis is based on a combined methodological approach, which includes, on the one hand, a review of strategic documents, national and international studies, and reports, and, on the other hand, an analysis of empirical data collected through a standardized survey conducted with all municipalities in the country, first implemented in 2019 and repeated in 2022 and 2025 in order to enable comparison over time.

This approach allows for an integrated analysis that combines the institutional perspective with empirical evidence, making it possible to identify the progress achieved, the gaps that persist, and the differences across municipalities. In this regard, the document examines decentralization across several interrelated dimensions - legal, administrative, financial, and service-related - reflecting the complexity of this function and its impact on local development and children’s well-being.

Building on this analysis, the document presents evidence-based recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness, equity, and sustainability of preschool education. At the same time, it contributes to the broader debate on the balance between local autonomy and the guarantee of national standards, as well as on the next steps of decentralization reform in the education sector and beyond.



**For a clearer division of roles and more effective
support for municipalities**

**THE BALANCE BETWEEN NATIONAL
STANDARDS AND LOCAL RESPONSIBILITIES IN
THE CONTEXT OF DECENTRALIZATION OF
PRESCHOOL EDUCATION**



Key messages

- **Decentralization of preschool education has strengthened the role of municipalities** in service delivery, while the role of the Ministry of Education and Sports remains essential for ensuring standards, quality, coordination and support of the system.
- **The success of decentralization does not only depend on municipalities**, but also on the ability of the Ministry of Education and Sports to exercise a clearer, more functional and more supportive role in the system.
- **A national framework of policies, curricula and standards has been maintained**, which has helped to guide municipalities and maintain a common reference for the quality of service.
- **Progress has been more visible at the level of policies and standards** than in practical support for implementation, which shows that decentralization needs stronger operational instruments.
- **The division of competences between the Ministry of Education and Sports, its structures and municipalities remain unclear**, creating overlaps, gaps and ambiguities. What is further required is more clarity, standardization, methodological support and institutional coordination.
- **A comprehensive national package of minimum service standards**, accompanied by concrete and equally applicable guidelines in all municipalities, is lacking.
- **The monitoring, evaluation and data system for preschool education remains fragmented**, which makes it difficult to plan, compare and improve quality at national and local levels.
- **The processes for teaching materials and the evaluation of kindergarten directors by municipalities are not yet unified**, which produces territorial differences in implementation.
- **Inclusive education remains one of the weakest points of the system**, due to the lack of assistant teachers, psychosocial services and specialized training.
- **The licensing and monitoring of non-public kindergartens remains poorly coordinated**, while municipalities do not have a sufficient role in verifying local safety and operation conditions.
- **Municipalities view the Ministry of Education and Sports as a strategic partner**, not just a normative body, to make decentralization feasible, measurable and fair throughout the country.

- **The main priorities for further consolidation of the decentralization of preschool education services are:** clarification of competencies, fulfillment of national minimum standards, standard cost methodology, clearer allocation of preschool education financing, unified national set of didactic tools, national data registry, clearer legal regulation for non-public kindergartens and better coordination of field service monitoring.

1. CONTEXT

The decentralization of preschool education in Albania has brought about a significant reconfiguration of roles between local and central government. With the transfer of preschool education as an exclusive function of municipalities, the responsibility for the provision, administration and daily management of this service has shifted to the local level. However, this has not diminished the role of the Ministry of Education and Sports; on the contrary, it has made it even more important in the functions of policy-making, standardization, quality assurance, institutional coordination and support to municipalities in implementation.

In the current framework, the Ministry of Education and Sports remains the main institution responsible for drafting national policies in education, for setting standards, for developing the education curriculum and for the general supervision of the pre-university education system. Alongside it, deconcentrated structures and subordinate agencies also operate, which exercise important functions in monitoring, evaluation, professional development and policy implementation. This is where one of the main issues of decentralization emerges: while municipalities retain direct responsibility for the service, the Ministry of Education and Sports and its structures remain actors with broad competences in terms of standards, personnel, monitoring and key processes of the system's operation.

This interdependence has made it possible to maintain a common national framework for preschool education, but at the same time has also produced ambiguities in the division of roles, overlapping competences and gaps in coordination. In many important aspects of the service, such as quality monitoring, methodological support, evaluation of directors, provision of didactic materials, inclusion of children with disabilities, functioning of psycho-social services and licensing of non-public kindergartens, municipalities and the Ministry of Education and Sports interact in a framework that is not always sufficiently clear, standardized and coordinated.

In this sense, the further success of the decentralization of preschool education depends not only on the capacities of the municipalities, but also on the ability of the Ministry of Education and Sports to exercise its leading role in the system in a clearer, more supported and more functional way. This means not only maintaining national

standards, but also creating instruments that help municipalities implement them uniformly and effectively throughout the territory.

2. ASSESSMENT OF MAIN DEVELOPMENTS

In recent years, several positive developments have been noted that demonstrate that the Ministry of Education and Sports has continued to play an important role in consolidating the decentralized function of preschool education. One of the main achievements has been the maintenance of a national framework of policies and standards, which has helped to guide municipalities and maintain a common reference for the quality of service. National education and decentralization strategies have recognized preschool education as a priority, linking it to the objectives of inclusion, quality and human development.

The continuity of the national curriculum, pedagogical standards and professional development mechanisms of staff has also played an important role. Through national training programs, through qualification standards and through the “Teachers for Albania” portal, the Ministry of Education and Sports has contributed to increasing professionalism and standardizing several processes related to pedagogical staff. Also, through the Pre-university Education Quality Assurance Agency and other responsible structures, an important link has been maintained between national education policy and practice on the ground.

At the same time, improvement has been noted in the reporting and monitoring of several key indicators of preschool education, as well as in the increased attention to inclusion, child protection and inter-institutional cooperation. Child protection units and cross-cutting technical groups have been consolidated in many municipalities, while interventions supported by international partners have helped produce practical guidelines, process models and useful instruments for local governments.

From the municipalities' point of view, these developments have been important because they have helped ensure that decentralization does not remain a mere transfer of responsibilities, but is accompanied by a national guiding framework. However, municipalities assess that progress has been more visible at the level of standards and policies than in the creation of a complete and functional support mechanism for their implementation.

3. MAIN CHALLENGES

Despite the achievements, a substantial number of issues remain unresolved and directly affect the role of the Ministry of Education and Sports in the decentralized system of preschool education.

First, the full division of competences between the Ministry, its subordinate institutions and municipalities. In practice, many important processes remain fragmented among different actors, without a clear line of responsibility. This affects planning, monitoring, reporting and the very ability of municipalities to fully exercise their function.

Second, there is a lack of a comprehensive national package of minimum service standards, accompanied by concrete implementation instruments. Even when standards exist in general form, they are not always translated into clear operational guidelines for municipalities. This leads to different interpretations on the ground and produces inequalities in service provision.

Third, weaknesses persist in the monitoring, evaluation and reporting system. Data on preschool education remain fragmented, distributed across different institutions and not always harmonized. The lack of a national register or a unique information system makes it difficult to plan on a realistic basis in terms of attendance, staffing, support needs, service performance and quality indicators.

Fourth, the processes related to teaching materials, teacher evaluation, quality monitoring and methodological support remain insufficient or non-unified. Municipalities need more clarity and common instruments to guarantee comparable standards across the territory.

Fifth, inclusive education remains one of the most problematic areas. The lack of assistant teachers, the uncertainty about their status and function, the lack of specialized training and the low availability of psychosocial services significantly limit the system's ability to respond to the needs of children with disabilities and children in vulnerable situations.

Finally, the licensing and monitoring of non-public kindergartens presents serious weaknesses in coordination and in the control of standards. Municipalities are better acquainted with local conditions, but they do not have a clear legal role in verifying the safety conditions, infrastructure and functioning of these institutions.

4. POSITION OF MUNICIPALITIES

From the perspective of the municipalities, the decentralization of preschool education cannot function sustainably without a clearer, more supportive and more coherent role of the Ministry of Education and Sports. The municipalities require a more functional architecture of the relationship between the central and local levels.

The mayors hold that the Ministry of Education and Sports should focus more clearly on the functions that only it can guarantee in a unified manner: clarifying the legal framework, defining minimum national standards, providing common instruments for monitoring and evaluation, unifying references for didactic materials, strengthening

the professional development of staff, as well as building a more integrated data and quality assurance system.

From this perspective, the municipalities consider the Ministry not simply as a normative body, but as an indispensable strategic partner to make decentralization feasible, measurable and fair throughout the country.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FINANCING THE PRESCHOOL EDUCATION SERVICE

Based on the findings and lessons learned during the 10 years of decentralization of the preschool education service, on the results of the national survey on the fulfillment of national standards by municipalities, carried out within the framework of the “Strong Municipalities” project in 2019, 2022 and 2025, as well as on the discussions of the Pre-university Education Forum, the mayors propose the following priority directions for the Ministry of Education and Sports:

- 1.** Clarify the division of competences in the legal framework (Law No. 69/2012 “On the Pre-university Education System in the Republic of Albania”) and by-laws. In cooperation with the municipalities, revise the relevant normative acts to eliminate overlaps and ambiguities between municipalities, LOPUEs, regional directorates and other structures. Clarification of roles is a condition for accountability and effective functioning of decentralization.
- 2.** Complete the framework of national minimum standards for the provision of preschool education service. In cooperation with municipalities, clear, achievable and measurable standards for infrastructure, safety, staffing ratios, inclusion, support services and pedagogical quality need to be developed or updated, accompanied by practical guidelines for implementation by municipalities.
- 3.** In cooperation with municipalities, the Minister for Local Government and the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Education and Sports needs to lead the development of a national methodology for calculating the standard cost per child in preschool education, linked to service standards and realistic needs planning.
- 4.** Support the clear separation of financing of preschool education from basic education, through a revision of the sectorial grant formula and a clearer identification of financing preschool education, in order to increase the transparency and effectiveness of the use of funds.
- 5.** Create a unified national didactic set, a national reference package of didactic tools and materials by age group, based on the education curriculum and accompanied by indicative costs, so that municipalities have a common basis for

planning and procurement.

6. Strengthen the data system for preschool education. It is necessary to create a national registry or an integrated information system for preschool education, which includes data on registration, actual attendance, staff, children with special needs, performance and key quality indicators.
7. Clearly regulate the licensing and monitoring process of non-public kindergartens, strengthen institutional coordination in this area and define a clearer role for municipalities in verifying local safety conditions, infrastructure and operation of non-public kindergartens.
8. Better coordinate supervision and field visits. Municipalities require that controls, inspections and visits from central structures be coordinated with municipalities, more predictable and less fragmented, in order to avoid administrative overload and overlap and increase their real value for improving the service.

IN CONCLUSION

Municipalities assess that the decentralization of preschool education has strengthened their role in providing a service closer to the community and more sensitive to local needs. However, to turn this function into a complete success story, it is essential that the Ministry of Education and Sports exercise its leadership role in the system in a clearer and more functional way.

What is further required is more clarity, more standardization, more methodological support and more coordination. Only in this way it can be ensured that the decentralization of preschool education does not produce different standards according to the territory, but guarantees that every child, in every municipality, has access to a quality, safe and comprehensive service.

Experience to date shows that, when responsibilities are brought closer to the community and supported by clear standards, sufficient funding and institutional coordination, services become more accountable, more efficient and more connected to the real needs of the territory.

6. MAIN LEGAL ACTS IN NEED OF REVISION:

- Law no. 69/2012, “On the pre-university education system in the Republic of Albania”.
- Law no. 10081/2009, “On licenses, authorizations and permits in the Republic of Albania”.
- DCM no. 99, dated 27.02.2019, “On the establishment, manner of organization and functioning of the General Directorate of Pre-university Education”.
- Sub-legal acts on sectorial transfer and the education budget program.
- Instruction no. 43, dated 21.08.2013, “On the planning of budget funds, procurement and purchase of teaching aids for public educational institutions”.
- Instruction no. 26, dated 25.11.2019, “On the assistant teacher for students with disabilities in public institutions of pre-university education”.
- Order no. 31, dated 28.01.2020, “On the approval of the regulation on the functioning of pre-university educational institutions in the Republic of Albania”.
- Instructions on the inspection of kindergartens (2011).
- Instruction on the local Medium-Term Budget Program.

**For a fairer, more transparent and sustainable
financing system for municipalities**

**FINANCING PRESCHOOL EDUCATION
IN THE CONTEXT OF CONSOLIDATING
DECENTRALIZATION**



Key messages

- Preschool education is a key decentralized function for municipalities, with a direct impact on child development, social inclusion and family support.
- Decentralization has increased municipalities' responsibilities faster than their financial capacity, leaving gaps in the full and equitable financing of the service.
- Municipalities have gradually increased their financial commitment to preschool education, expanding the use of their own funds beyond basic expenses, towards didactic materials, maintenance, human resources and support for children in need.
- However, progress remains uneven across municipalities, as the ability to finance the service is closely linked to local fiscal capacity, producing territorial inequalities.
- The current financing formula does not reflect the real costs of the service, as it does not fully include support staff, assistant teachers, psychologists, didactic materials, maintenance, training, food and transport.
- The lack of a national methodology for standard costing and a clear separation of financing of preschool education from basic education reduces transparency, weakens accountability and makes it difficult to plan, compare and monitor effectively expenditures.
- Financing of preschool education is directly linked to equity in access, as children from poor families, remote areas and marginalized groups more often face economic and social barriers to attending kindergarten.
- Municipalities are demanding a fairer, more transparent and more predictable financing system, which guarantees a minimum standard of service for every child, regardless of residence.
- The main priorities of the reform are clear: increased public financing, a national methodology for standard costing, full costing of the service, a dedicated grant for preschool education, financing of support services and targeted subsidy schemes for children in need.
- Preschool education should be treated as a strategic investment, because without fair financing and strong equalization mechanisms, the decentralization of this function remains incomplete

1. CONTEXT

Over the last decade, Albania has undertaken a deep decentralization reform, which has progressively transferred important public service functions from the central government to local government units. Among these functions, preschool education constitutes one of the most important areas of reform, not only because of its weight in municipal budgets, but also because of its role as a basic service with a direct impact on child development, social inclusion and family support. The legal basis for this transfer was established by Law No. 139/2015 “On Local Self-Government”, which defined preschool education as an exclusive function of municipalities. The full implementation of the reform took shape in 2017, when municipalities took responsibility for the budgetary, administrative and managerial aspects of service provision in public kindergartens, supported by unconditional sectorial grants from the central government.

This transition represents a fundamental change from a centralized model of service provision towards a decentralized approach, which aims to increase efficiency, quality and adaptation of the service to local needs. In this context, municipalities today exercise a much broader role in infrastructure planning, financial and human resource management, maintenance, procurement, as well as monitoring the quality of the service. However, the decentralization of preschool education has also increased the complexity of local government, as municipalities have to cope with increasing responsibilities, often in conditions of different administrative capacities and limited fiscal autonomy. Although they have gained more roles and responsibilities, municipalities remain structurally dependent on national fiscal grants, while the central government retains the competence to set binding standards at the national level. This interdependence continues to create implementation challenges, unclear division of responsibilities and coordination gaps between levels of government. In this context, the analysis of the decentralization of preschool education should be seen not only as an assessment of a transferred function, but also as a reflection of how the relationship between central and local government functions in Albania. On the one hand, positive developments have been noted in terms of institutional consolidation, continuity of service and gradual increase in local ownership of the function. On the other hand, significant challenges related to financing, human capacities, service quality and inequalities between municipalities remain. Particularly in the financial dimension, decentralization has progressed faster than the construction of a complete, transparent and equitable financing framework, which limits the ability of some municipalities to guarantee the same service standards throughout the territory.

Precisely for this reason, the discussion on preschool education is not only related to the improvement of this sector, but also to the need to strengthen the very architecture of fiscal and functional decentralization in the country. Experience so far shows that

the success of decentralization does not depend only on the formal transfer of competencies, but on the ability to support them with sufficient funding, clear standards, coordination mechanisms and sustainable implementation capacities at the local level. In this sense, preschool education constitutes a significant case for understanding not only the achievements and limitations of the reform in this area, but also the lessons that can serve for other decentralized functions and for the improvement of intergovernmental relations in Albania.

2. ASSESSMENT OF MAIN DEVELOPMENTS VLERËSIMI I ZHVILLIMEVE KRYESORE

In the last decade, a gradual shift has been observed from a financing mainly based on central grants towards a more active involvement of municipalities in covering the costs of preschool education. In the initial phase of decentralization, the financial commitment of municipalities has been limited and focused mainly on basic operational expenses. In 2019, the use of their own source local funds for preschool education was still minimal and unstructured.

In the following years, especially until 2022 and beyond, a clearer increase in the use of local funds is observed. Municipalities begin to report more regularly and more clearly expenditures on didactic materials, maintenance, human resources, hygiene and sanitary infrastructure, food and support measures for the neediest groups. This indicates not only an increase in the financial weight of municipalities in this function, but also a qualitative change in the way municipalities understand and exercise their responsibility for preschool education.

In parallel, expenditures for the preschool function have followed a steady upward trend. After significant increases in 2018–2019, the period 2020–2021 is characterized by a relative slowdown, while in 2022–2023 a strong expansion of financing is again evident. This performance suggests that preschool education is gradually gaining greater weight in public and local financing priorities.

From the point of view of municipalities, this is a positive and important development. It shows that decentralization has not remained just a formal transfer of responsibilities, but is being accompanied by an increase in local financial commitment. However, this progress remains uneven among municipalities and largely dependent on local fiscal capacity.

3. MAJOR CHALLENGES

Despite the progress achieved, the financial dimension of preschool education continues to be characterized by structural constraints that hinder the provision of a quality, equitable and sustainable service throughout the country.

First, the current financing system does not reflect the real cost of providing the service. The sectorial grant formula does not fully take into account necessary components such as support staff, assistant teachers, psychologists, social workers,

nurses, teaching materials, building maintenance, staff training, food, transport and additional costs related to rural, remote or mountainous areas. As a result, many municipalities remain under pressure to cover with their own resources the financial gaps left by the existing scheme.

Second, there is a lack of a unified national methodology for costing the service. Without a clear standard for the cost per child or per institution, municipalities plan and report in different ways, making it impossible to compare efficiency, assess financial gaps and guide investments based on real needs.

Third, the lack of a clear separation of financing for preschool education from the broader “Basic Education” program significantly reduces transparency. In these conditions, municipalities cannot accurately identify how much funding actually goes to kindergartens and how much to basic education. This weakens accountability, makes performance monitoring difficult, and obscures the real impact of spending on preschool education.

Fourth, inequalities between municipalities remain high. Municipalities with a stronger revenue base are more likely to meet national grants with their own resources, while municipalities with more limited financial capacities lag behind, even when their needs are equally or even greater. In the absence of a stronger equalization mechanism, fiscal decentralization risks reproducing or deepening territorial inequalities.

Fifth, the financial dimension is directly linked to access. Even when the right to preschool education is legally recognized, many children continue to face real obstacles due to poverty, geographical distance, lack of transportation, food or material costs, and the social marginalization of target groups, including Roma and Egyptian communities. Without specific financial instruments to support these children, equality in access remains unfulfilled.

4. POSITION OF MUNICIPALITIES

From the perspective of municipalities, the issue is not simply increasing funds, but building a financial system that is fair, predictable, transparent and linked to real standards of service provision. Mayors consider preschool education as a fundamental function of local development, with a direct impact on children's well-being, women's participation in the labor market, social inclusion and the long-term development of communities.

In this sense, strengthening the financial dimension of preschool education requires a more balanced partnership between central and local governments. Municipalities are ready to continue to increase their financial responsibility and commitment, but this should be supported by a clearer and more functional national framework, which

guarantees that every municipality, regardless of its size or fiscal capacity, has a real opportunity to provide the minimum standard of service.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FINANCING PRESCHOOL EDUCATION SERVICE

Based on the above findings and the recommendations articulated in the Pre-university Education Forum, the mayors propose a package of measures aimed at strengthening financial sustainability, increasing transparency and ensuring territorial equality in the provision of preschool education.

- 1.** It is recommended to increase public funding for preschool education, treating this level not as a subcategory of basic education, but as a strategic investment in the long-term social, educational and economic development of the country. The increase in funding should reflect not only the expansion of the function, but also the demand for quality, inclusion and higher standards of service.
- 2.** A national methodology for standard cost per child is required, based on the principle “funding follows the child”. Such a methodology should provide municipalities with a common basis for planning and reporting, as well as enable real comparisons between local self-government units. This would create a reference standard for the minimum necessary funding and would more directly link funding to the child benefiting from the service.
- 3.** It is recommended to carry out a full costing of the preschool education service, based on existing legal and functional standards. This costing should include all real components of the service: support staff, assistant teachers, psychologists and social workers, nurses, didactic materials, maintenance and basic investment costs, staff training, as well as transportation costs for teachers and children. Such an analysis should serve as a basis for medium- and long-term budget planning, as well as for determining the real financial needs of each municipality.
- 4.** It is recommended to revise the sectorial grant formula for pre-university education, in order to clearly separate funding for preschool education from that for basic education. In this context, municipalities support the creation of a separate or identifiable grant for preschool education, which would more accurately reflect the nature, costs and needs of this function. Such a mechanism would increase transparency, improve the predictability of funding and strengthen accountability.
- 5.** Municipalities request increased funding for support services in preschool education, in particular for increasing the number of psychologists, assistant teachers for children with disabilities and for the development of psychosocial


services. Without these components, service provision remains truncated and does not fully respond to the needs of children and families.

6. Clearer and more sustainable financing of teaching materials and tools is recommended, through the development of a unified national teaching set and the determination of indicative costs for its implementation. This would help standardize the quality of pedagogical inputs across municipalities and reduce territorial differences in access to teaching materials.
7. It is recommended that the funding formula explicitly include the real costs of the service, taking into account not only teachers and the number of children, but also support staff, assistant teachers, teaching materials, support and social services, as well as other elements essential for the quality functioning of the service. Only in this way can municipalities have sufficient resources to guarantee a complete and quality service.
8. Municipalities support the creation of targeted subsidy schemes for children and families in need, in accordance with the principle that funding should follow the child and address real obstacles to participation in preschool education. These schemes should include support for food, transport, basic materials and necessary measures for children with special needs or from the most vulnerable groups. Such an approach would strengthen the social function of preschool education and help reduce inequalities in access. Rekomandohet rritja e financimit publik për arsimin parashkollor, duke e trajtuar këtë nivel jo si një nënkategori të arsimit bazë, por si një investim strategjik në zhvillimin afatgjatë social, arsimor dhe ekonomik të vendit. Rritja e financimit duhet të reflektojë jo vetëm zgjerimin e funksionit, por edhe kërkesën për cilësi, përfshirje dhe standarde më të larta të shërbimit.

IN CONCLUSION

The mayors believe that the decentralization of preschool education has created the institutional basis for a service closer to the community and more sensitive to local needs. However, to turn this responsibility into sustainable and equal results for all children, a new reform step is needed in the financial dimension.

Preschool education should not be seen as a peripheral item in local budgets, but as a strategic investment in human development, social cohesion and the future of the country. For this reason, municipalities require a financing system that truly supports service provision, reduces territorial inequalities and guarantees that every child, regardless of their residence or social status, has access to a quality preschool service.



**On strengthening the social and welfare
dimension in preschool education**

**CHILD WELFARE AND SOCIAL
PROTECTION IN THE CONTEXT OF
DECENTRALIZATION OF PRESCHOOL
EDUCATION**



Key messages

- Preschool education is not only an educational service, but also a function of the well-being, protection and early development of the child.
- The role of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare remains essential in the functioning of psychosocial services, child protection, nutrition, social inclusion and support for families in need.
- Progress has been made in establishing child protection units and inter-sectorial technical groups, but their functioning remains uneven between municipalities.
- Psychosocial services remain one of the weakest links in the system, as many municipalities still do not have full coverage with psychologists and social workers for preschool education.
- There is a lack of a clear national standard for coverage with psychologists, according to the number of children and territorial extension, especially for large municipalities and rural areas.
- The inclusion of children with disabilities remains incomplete, due to the lack of support services, assistant teachers, psychosocial coverage and early intervention.
- Roma, Egyptian and children from vulnerable families still face real barriers to enrolment and attendance, which requires more targeted social measures and active support for families.
- The food menu and food standard require revision, in order to better match the nutritional needs of children and the real costs of implementation by municipalities.
- Inter-institutional cooperation between education, health, social protection and municipalities should become more functional, more standardized and more oriented towards results for the child.
- Municipalities consider the Ministry a key partner in making preschool education more inclusive, more protective and more connected to the real needs of children and families.

- The main priorities are clear: standard for psychologists, strengthening of psychosocial services, revision of the menu, subsidizing families in need, support for children with disabilities and strengthening child protection mechanisms.
- Without a stronger social and welfare component, the decentralization of preschool education remains incomplete. Arsimi parashkollor nuk është vetëm shërbim arsimor, por edhe funksion i mirëqenies, mbrojtjes dhe zhvillimit të hershëm të fëmijës.

1. CONTEXT

The decentralization of preschool education in Albania has strengthened the role of municipalities in the provision and daily management of the service, but the nature of this function remains cross-cutting and requires the active involvement not only of the Ministry of Education and Sports, but also of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare. Preschool education is not just an educational service; it is directly related to child well-being, social protection, nutrition, inclusion, psychosocial development, early identification of developmental difficulties and family support.

In practice, many of the most sensitive issues identified by municipalities in the preschool function are precisely related to areas that affect the responsibility of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare: the functioning of the psychosocial service, child protection, support for children with disabilities, nutrition, inclusion of children from vulnerable groups, as well as inter-institutional coordination between social, health and educational services.

The data and discussions of the Pre-university Education Forum show that, although child protection units and inter- sectorial technical groups have been consolidated in many municipalities, support services still remain insufficient and uneven. Only a part of the municipalities report fully functional psychosocial services, while the lack of psychologists, social workers and sustainable early intervention mechanisms continues to limit the quality and comprehensiveness of the service.

In this sense, the success of the decentralization of preschool education depends not only on the local organization of the kindergarten as an educational institution, but also on the ability of the system to guarantee an integrated approach to care and support for the child. This makes the role of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare essential for the real functioning of preschool education as a comprehensive, protective service oriented towards the early development of the child.

2. ASSESSMENT OF MAIN DEVELOPMENTS

In recent years, several positive developments have been noted related to the interaction between preschool education and the social protection system. An important achievement has been the consolidation in many municipalities of child protection units and cross-cutting technical groups, which have created a better basis for identifying and treating cases of children in need of protection.

Also, in some municipalities, attention has been strengthened towards the inclusion of children from vulnerable groups, especially children with disabilities, Roma and Egyptian children and children at social risk. The improvement in the identification of children with special needs and the increase in the number of individual work plans are indicators that the system is gradually moving towards a more sensitive approach to inclusion.

In the field of nutrition, the existence of a nationally defined menu has helped to create a common reference for the provision of this service in kindergartens with meals. Also, the presence of committees or structures related to health and safety in some municipalities shows that the dimension of child well-being is gaining more attention.

From the perspective of municipalities, these developments have created the basis for better inter-institutional cooperation. However, progress remains partial and not uniform throughout the territory. It is more visible in the construction of structures than in ensuring sufficient capacities, standards and resources for their real functioning.

3. MAJOR CHALLENGES

Despite the progress, a considerable number of challenges remain unresolved and are directly related to the role of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in the decentralized system of preschool education.

First, the psychosocial service remains one of the weakest links in the system. In many municipalities it is not fully functional, while the lack of psychologists and social workers limits the ability of kindergartens to address the emotional, social and developmental needs of children. This problem is more pronounced in municipalities with large territories and in rural areas, where territorial coverage is difficult and not standardized.

Second, there is a lack of a clear national standard for coverage with psychologists and psychosocial services in preschool education. Without an indicative report on the number of children, geographical spread and intensity of need, municipalities find it difficult to plan the service and seek sufficient resources for it.

Third, support for children with disabilities remains insufficient. In addition to the lack of assistant teachers and specialized training, social and psychosocial support services that make inclusion real and not just formal are often missing. This significantly weakens the system's ability to provide a comprehensive service.

Fourth, the inclusion of Roma, Egyptian and children from vulnerable families remains problematic. Economic, social and cultural barriers directly affect enrolment and attendance, while there is a lack of sustainable social support mechanisms to help families cope with the costs associated with food, transport and basic needs.

Fifth, the issue of food needs to be revised. Although there is a defined menu, a significant part of municipalities do not allocate sufficient funds for food, which indicates a gap between the normative standard and real implementation. This suggests the need to update the menu, determine indicative costs and revise the standard in function of nutritional needs and the realities of municipalities.

Finally, inter-institutional coordination remains insufficient. Although structures such as child protection units and inter-sectorial technical groups are in place, cooperation between education, health, social protection and municipalities is not always standardized, documented and oriented towards concrete results for the child.

4. POSITION OF MUNICIPALITIES

From the municipalities' perspective, preschool education cannot be considered complete if it is treated only as an educational function. It requires an integrated approach, where child well-being, family support, social protection, nutrition and psychosocial services are an integral part of service provision.

The mayors believe that the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare should have a clearer and more active role in the functions related to child well-being in preschool education: standardization of psychosocial services, support for vulnerable children, child protection mechanisms, nutritional support and inter-institutional coordination with municipalities and the Ministry of Education and Sports.

In this sense, the municipalities consider the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare not only as a sectorial actor, but as a key partner in making preschool education more inclusive, more protective and more connected to the real needs of children and families.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FINANCING PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

A clear guiding ratio of psychologist/child and psychologist/territory should be defined, taking into account not only the number of children, but also the geographical

spread of the municipality, the difficulties of access and the real needs of the communities

1. Revise and standardize the organization of psychosocial services in public kindergartens. The Ministry should draft clear guidelines for covering kindergartens with psychologists and social workers, for the functioning of psychosocial services and for its connection with local child protection structures.
2. Strengthen early intervention for children in need of support. Stronger mechanisms should be built for the early identification, referral and support of children with developmental difficulties, children with disabilities and children at social risk, in cooperation with municipalities and educational institutions.
3. Revise the food menu for preschool education and its indicative cost. Given that not all municipalities manage to fully implement the current standard, a revision of the menu is needed according to nutritional requirements, age groups and real implementation costs, in order for the standard to be applicable, up-to-date and financially sustainable.
4. Support the creation of social subsidy schemes for children and families in need. These schemes should include support for food, transportation, basic materials and other needs that directly affect regular kindergarten attendance, especially for low-income families, Roma and Egyptian children and children in remote areas.
5. Strengthen support for the inclusion of children with disabilities. In addition to physical accessibility, the Ministry should contribute to building a clear social and psychosocial support package for these children, so that inclusion is not limited to registration, but is translated into real participation and ongoing support.
6. Standardize and strengthen inter-institutional cooperation for child protection. Cooperation protocols between child protection units, psychosocial services, kindergartens, municipalities and other relevant institutions should be revised and strengthened, so that existing mechanisms function better and in a more unified manner.
7. Develop programs for parent education and family support. The Ministry could support structured programs for parent education on the importance of the early years of childhood, nutrition, psychosocial development and the role of the family in the attendance and success of the child in preschool education.
8. Improve the collection and use of social data on preschool education. The database for children in need of protection, children with disabilities, coverage

with psychologists and social services, as well as for children from vulnerable groups, should be strengthened, so that policies and interventions are evidence-based.

9. Ensure a more integrated approach between education, health and social protection. The Ministry should take a more active role in building a more coordinated 0–6 model, where services for children do not remain separated by sectors, but function as a connected system, with a focus on early development and child well-being.

IN CONCLUSION

Municipalities think that the decentralization of preschool education has strengthened their role in providing a service closer to the community and more sensitive to local needs. However, to make this function truly comprehensive and oriented towards the well-being of the child, it is indispensable for the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare to exercise its role in the system in a clearer and more functional way.

What is further required is more standardization of support services, more clarity in the division of roles, more inter-institutional coordination and more support for children and families in need. Only in this way it can be guaranteed that preschool education does not remain just an educational service, but functions as an integrated service of early development, protection and welfare of the child.

Based on the experience created and the lessons learned from the decentralization of preschool education, municipalities believe that strengthening the social and welfare component in this function is a condition for a new qualitative phase of the reform. Experience so far shows that, when educational services are supported by real mechanisms of protection, inclusion and social care, they become more sustainable, fairer and more responsive to the real needs of children and communities.

6. MAIN LEGAL ACTS IN NEED OF REVISION:

- Annex 4, point 8, “5-day menu for children aged 3–6 in kindergartens”, of Order no. 76/1, dated 24.01.2018, as amended by Order no. 457, dated 13.06.2018.
- Order no. 483, dated 19.09.2025 “On some amendments to Order no. 313 dated 20.10.2020 “On the organization and functioning of the psychosocial service in pre-university education institutions and the procedures for appointment, suspension and dismissal in the psychosocial service”.
- Instruction no. 26, dated 25.11.2019, “On the assistant teacher for students with disabilities in public pre-university education institutions”.

**On the consolidation of decentralization in pre-
university education**

**PRESCHOOL EDUCATION AS THE BASIS
FOR THE NEW PHASE OF REFORM
WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE
REVISION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE-
TERRITORIAL REFORM**



Key messages

- Preschool education constitutes the most consolidated decentralized function in the education sector and an important basis for the next phase of reform.
- Experience to date shows that decentralization has contributed to strengthening local management of the service and has created an important basis for the next phase of reform.
- The next phase of reform requires not only maintaining the existing model, but consolidating it through legal revision and improving national policies.
- Decentralization works best when accompanied by clear standards, sufficient funding and strong local capacities.
- Preschool education should be addressed more clearly and in a more structured manner in national education policies.
- The Education Strategy 2027–2030 should more clearly reflect the role and development of this function in a decentralized system.
- The experience of this function suggests the possibility of further, careful and evidence-based decentralization of pre-university education.
- Without a second phase of reform oriented towards clarification, standardization and support of the system, decentralization risks remaining only partially consolidated.

1. CONTEXT

The decentralization of preschool education in Albania constitutes one of the most important reforms in the framework of strengthening local governance. The transfer of the function to municipalities has increased the proximity of the service to the community and has created opportunities for a more flexible management and better adapted to local needs.

This development should be viewed in the context of the administrative-territorial reform undertaken after 2013, which reorganized the territorial and functional division of local government, creating 61 municipalities with the aim of increasing the efficiency, capacities and quality of public services.

Today, more than a decade after its implementation, the administrative-territorial reform process has entered a phase of revision and broader reflection on the functioning of local government. At the same time, recent European Union assessments highlight that the division of responsibilities between the central and local levels remains problematic and that the institutional and administrative capacities of local government require further strengthening.

In this sense, the administrative-territorial reform should be seen as a dynamic process, requiring not only a revision of the territorial organization, but also of the way in which public functions are distributed and managed between levels of government. The experience of decentralizing preschool education, as one of the most consolidated functions at the local level, provides a valuable basis for this reflection process. It shows both the advantages of bringing services closer to the citizen, as well as the limitations related to the legal framework, financing and institutional capacities.

Consequently, the current process of revising the administrative-territorial reform creates an appropriate momentum to revise also the legal and strategic framework of functional decentralization, including Law No. 139/2015 “On Local Self-Government” and sectorial education policies. In this context, a second phase of reform is needed, oriented towards the consolidation of the transferred functions and the creation of a clearer and more sustainable model of decentralization, in particular within the framework of the Education Strategy 2027–2030.

2. ASSESSMENT OF MAIN DEVELOPMENTS

The decentralization of preschool education has brought about significant improvements in the local management of the service. Municipalities have gradually consolidated themselves as the main actors in the organization, financing and administration of public kindergartens, bringing decision-making closer to communities and creating more space for adaptation to local needs. This makes preschool education one of the clearest cases of functional decentralization in Albania.

Overall, the experience gained shows that preschool education has produced an important basis of lessons for the next phase of reform. It proves that decentralization can work when responsibilities are clear, when legal and financial support is sufficient and when the local level is accompanied by appropriate methodological and coordination instruments.

3. MAJOR CHALLENGES

The ongoing process of revising the administrative-territorial reform brings the challenge of further clarifying and consolidating the division of responsibilities between the central and local levels, so that decentralization in education is built on a more stable legal and institutional basis.

In this context, the revision of Law No. 139/2015 “On Local Self-Government” assumes particular importance to clarify and enhance the role of municipalities in the pre-university education service function and to build a more coherent framework for future decentralization developments.

Equally essential is the integration of the decentralization dimension in the Education Strategy 2027–2030, addressing in a more structured manner and paving the way for a gradual and well-organized approach to the further decentralization of pre-university education.

Another important direction is the better harmonization of sectorial policies with the local government framework, so that developments in education are not addressed in isolation, but as part of a broader and more functional model of decentralization.

Also, strengthening the link between responsibilities and financing is required, as well as building more sustainable coordination and monitoring mechanisms, which make decentralization more effective and more results-oriented.

In this context, using the experience of preschool education as a reference model is of particular value for building a careful, gradual and evidence-based approach to the further decentralization of pre-university education.

4. POSITION OF MUNICIPALITIES

Municipalities hold that the decentralization of preschool education has been an important step in improving the service and bringing it closer to the community. Their experience shows that local management has brought about more flexibility, more sensitivity to local conditions and more direct responsibility for the functioning of kindergartens.

At the same time, municipalities consider a new phase of reform necessary, which should focus on consolidating the function and building a more balanced system between local autonomy and guaranteeing national standards. From their perspective, any further step in decentralization should be based on the lessons learned from this function.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DECENTRALIZATION OF THE FUNCTION

- Revise Law No. 139/2015 “On Local Self-Government”, so that the role of municipalities in pre-university education is further consolidated, as part of the broader reflection on the new phase of the administrative-territorial reform.
- Based on the experience gained and the lessons learned from the decentralization of preschool education, municipalities believe that the possibility of further,

gradual and well-structured decentralization of pre-university education, including basic education, should be considered.

- Improve the Education Strategy 2027–2030, treating preschool education as a priority area, with clear objectives, dedicated measures, measurable indicators and a national action plan, as well as reflecting the perspective of further decentralization of educational functions.

IN CONCLUSION

The decentralization of preschool education has established an important basis for building a basic education system closer to the citizen and more sensitive to local needs.

However, in order to move to a new qualitative phase, it is necessary to strengthen the legal framework, improve national policies and implement a clearer and more functional model of decentralization.

Experience to date shows that decentralization is not just a matter of transferring responsibilities, but of building a balanced system, where local autonomy is accompanied by clear standards, sufficient support, and effective coordination mechanisms.

DATA FROM THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION (BTF 2019, 2025)

Table 1 Number of kindergartens and enrolled children

| Year | Indicator | No. of kindergartens | Enrolled children | Children from minority groups | Children with Disabilities | Plans for children with special needs |
|------|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 2019 | Average | 27.36 | 884.02 | 31.71 | 5.23 | 2.86 |
| 2019 | Standard deviation | 19.39 | 854.30 | 50.29 | 5.11 | 4.14 |
| 2019 | Median | 22 | 657 | 10 | 3 | 1 |
| 2025 | Average | 27.80 | 729.37 | 28.36 | 20.67 | 9.95 |
| 2025 | Standard deviation | 28.11 | 880.47 | 55.23 | 69.65 | 28.47 |
| 2025 | Median | 20 | 475 | 7 | 5 | 2 |

Chart 1 Enrollment of children from minorities and children with disabilities

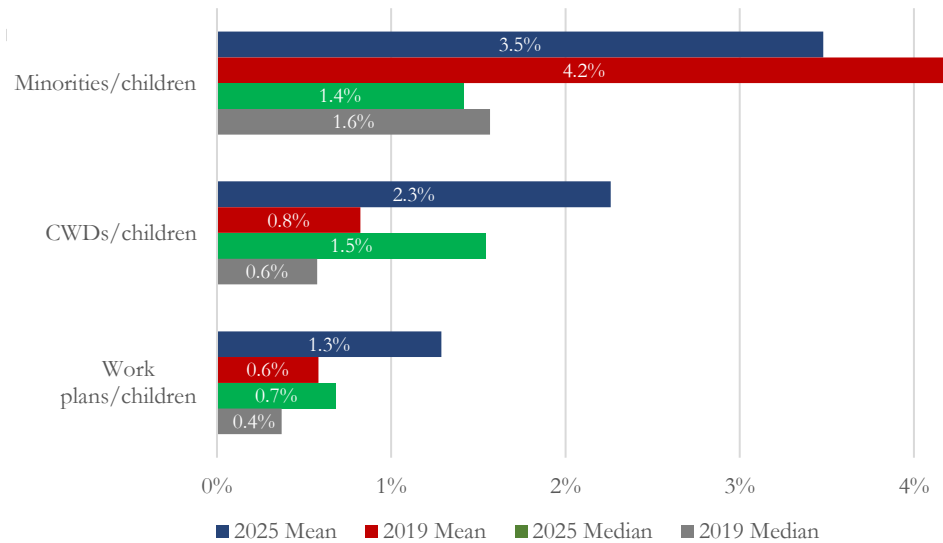


Chart 2 Average compliance of municipalities with standards in preschool education

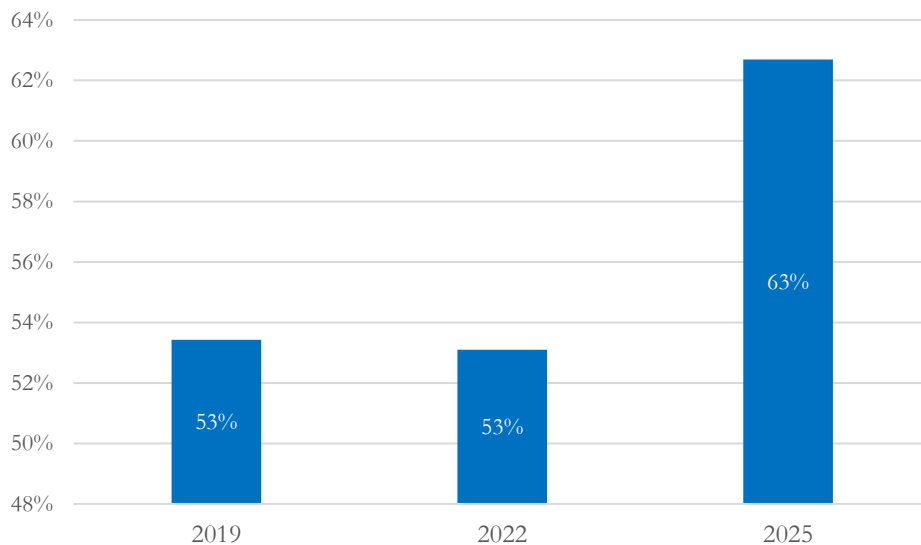


Chart 3 Municipalities support integration and social protection in preschool education through dedicated social workers

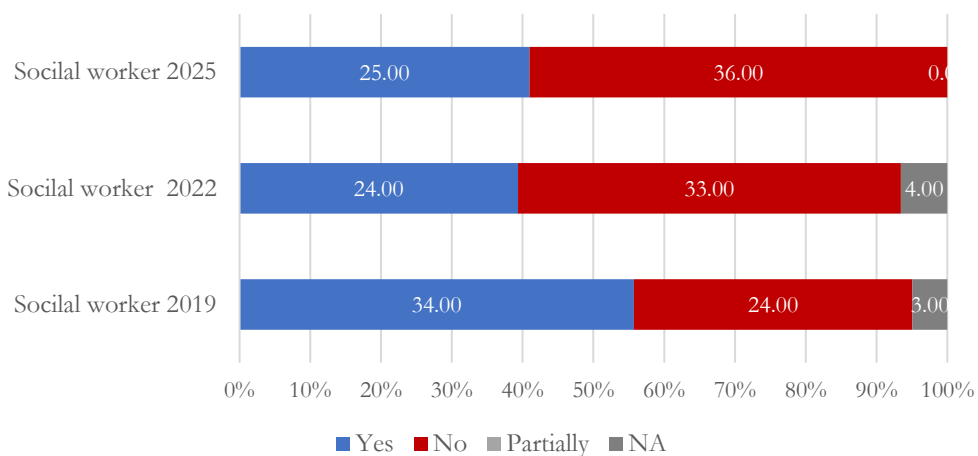


Chart 4 Municipalities support inclusion in preschool education through psychologists dedicated to preschool education

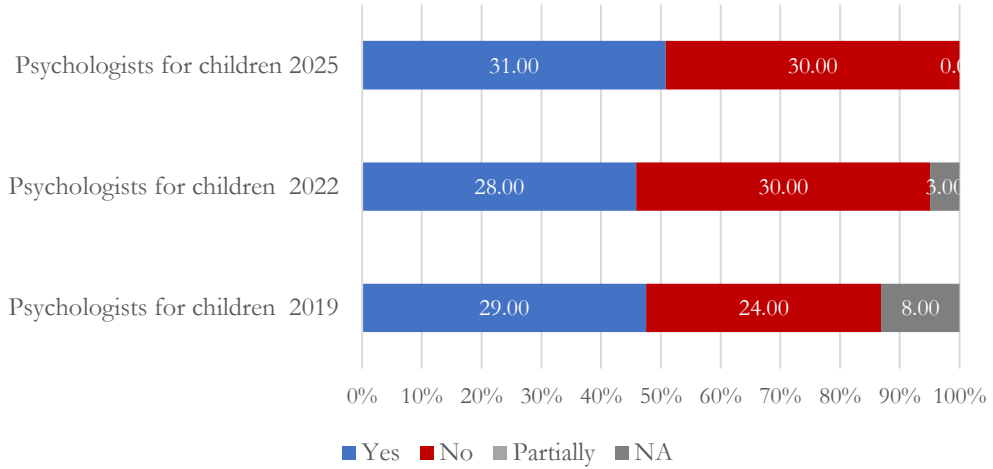


Chart 5 Municipalities implement the approved food menu

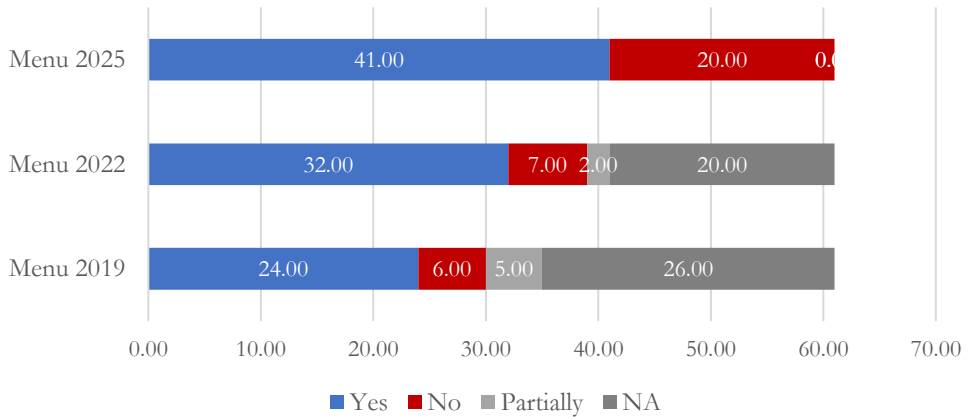


Chart 6 Municipalities support the inclusion of children with disabilities in preschool education through the engagement of assistant teachers

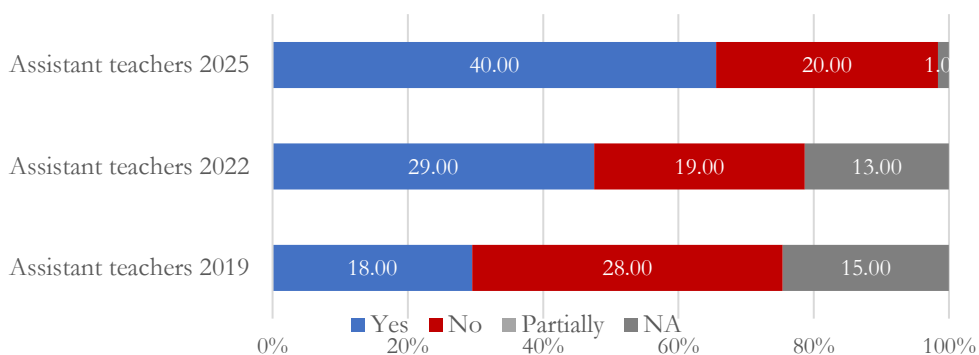


Chart 7 Municipalities implement the "Teachers for Albania" portal during the recruitment process of academic staff

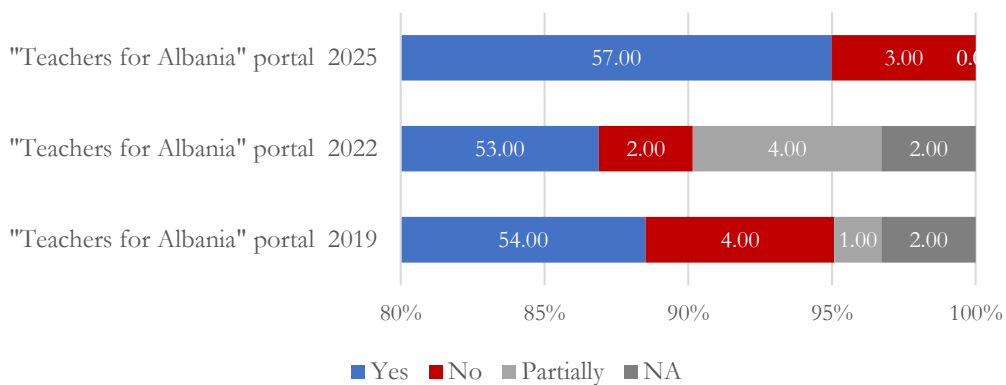


Chart 8 Teachers' training

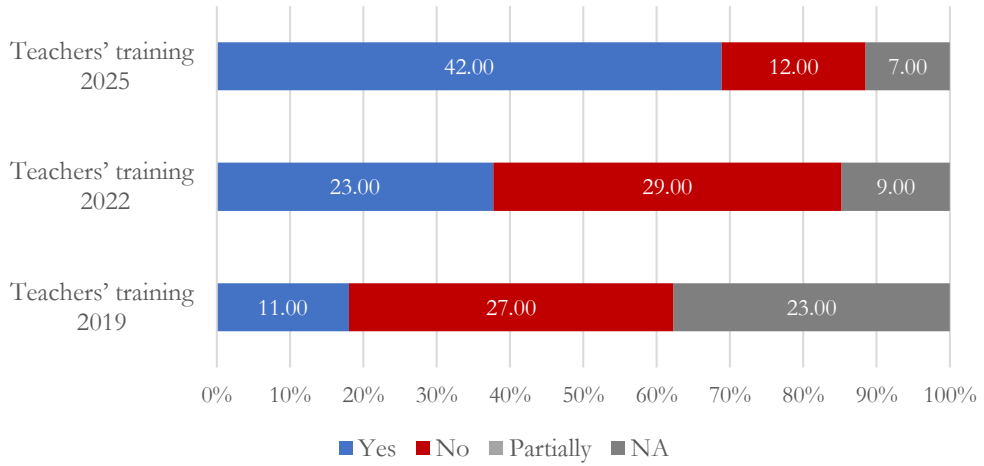


Chart 9 Operational parent councils and kindergarten boards

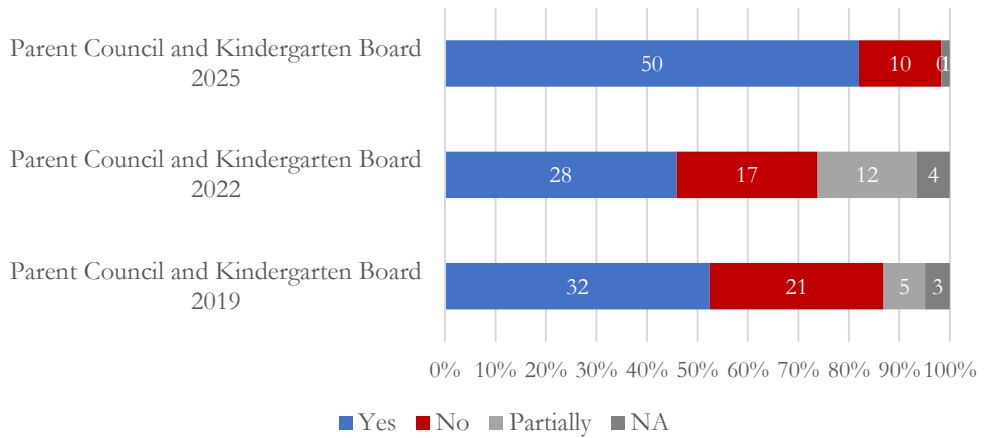


Chart 10 Comparison of compliance with standards

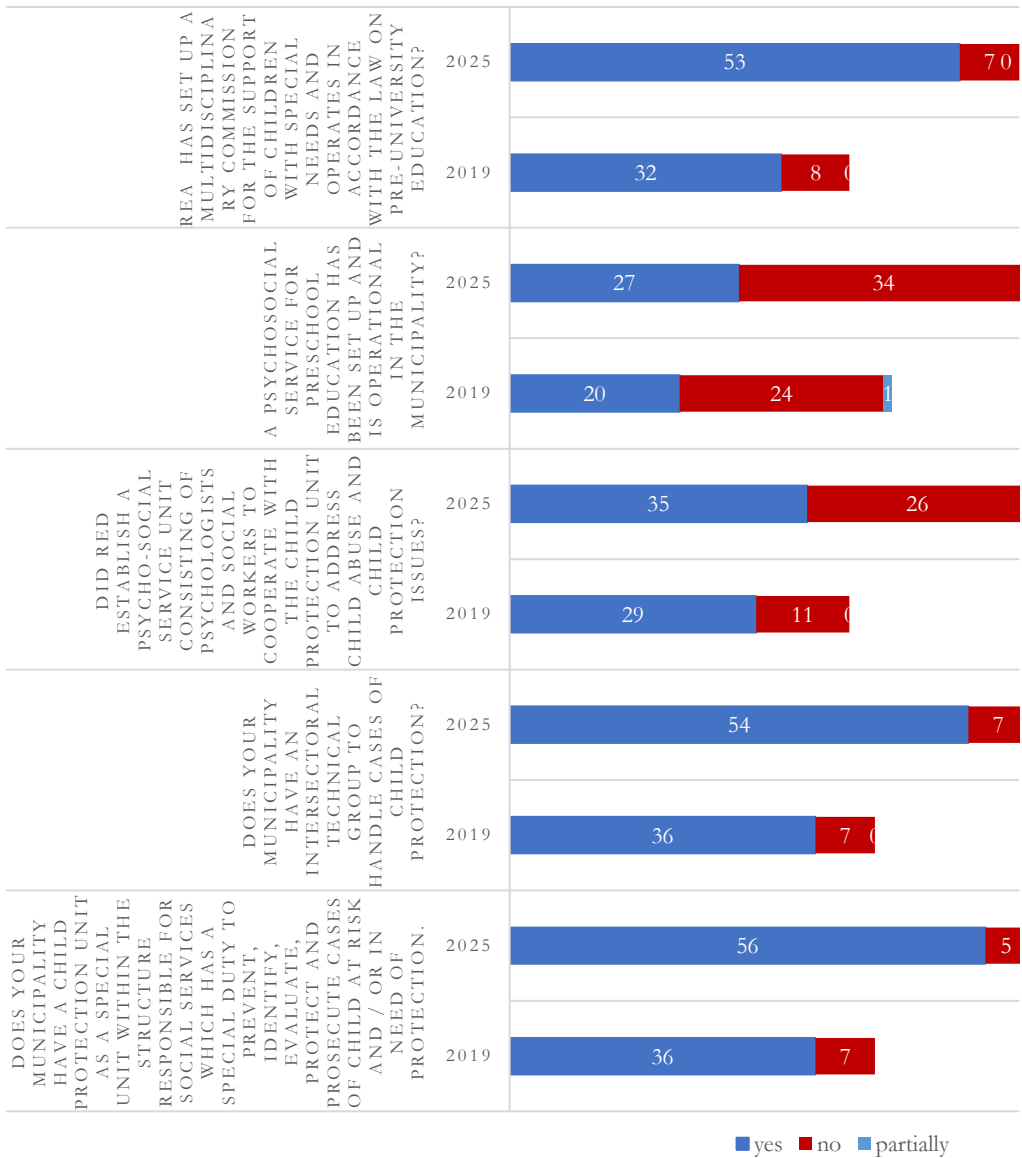


Table 2: Public spending on education by level of education and level of government in 2018 (in millions of ALL)

| Education level | Total (millions of ALL) | MoES | Expenditures from general municipal revenues | Specific grants for education | ADF | % of total education spending | % from municipal budgets |
|----------------------|-------------------------|--------|--|-------------------------------|-------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Basic education | 29,401 | 20,357 | 2,908 | 4,624 | 1,512 | 56% | 26% |
| Vocational education | 2,744 | 2,465 | 84 | 196 | | 5% | 10% |
| Science | 415 | 415 | | | | 1% | |
| MoES budget | 666 | 666 | | | | 1% | |
| % of public spending | 11.1% | 8.7% | 0.9% | 1.1% | 0.5% | na | 2.0% |

Source: USAID 2020.

Chart 11 Education spending and growth rate, 2016–2023

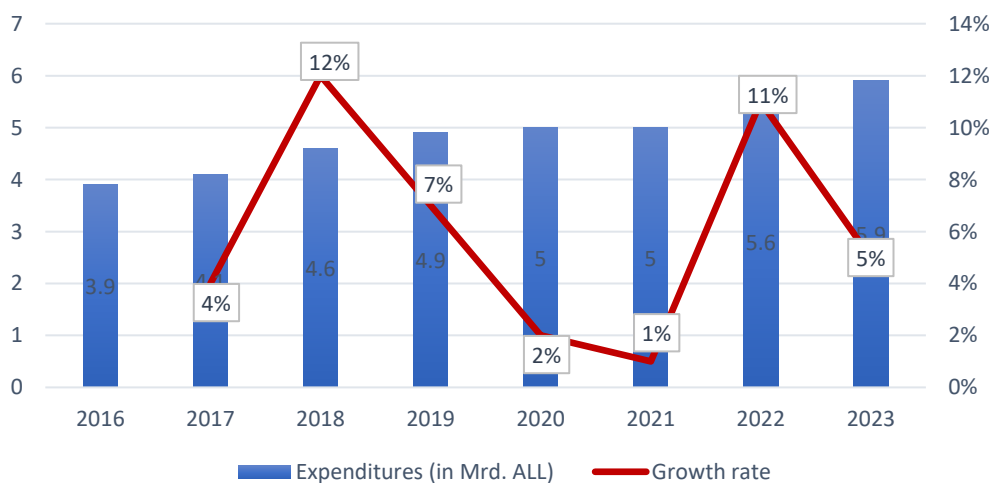
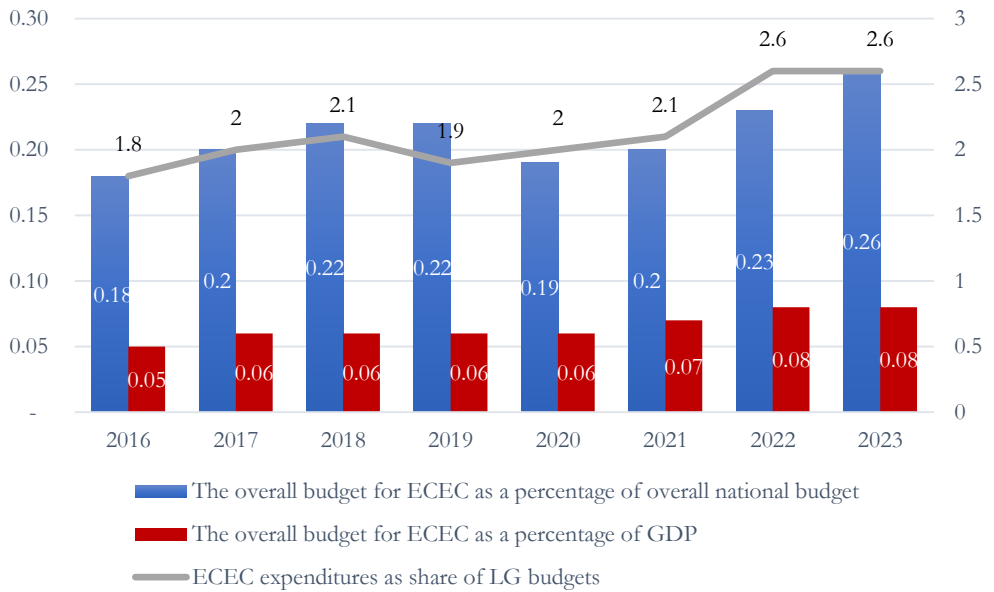


Chart 12 Budget for early childhood education and care versus the national budget, GDP and local government budgets, 2016–2023



Source: World Bank 2025

Chart 13 Structure of allocation of municipal funds

