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Evaluation report
regarding the implementation of
Law 248/2015
that stimulates impoverished children's participation in preschool
through food coupons conditional on attendance

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY -

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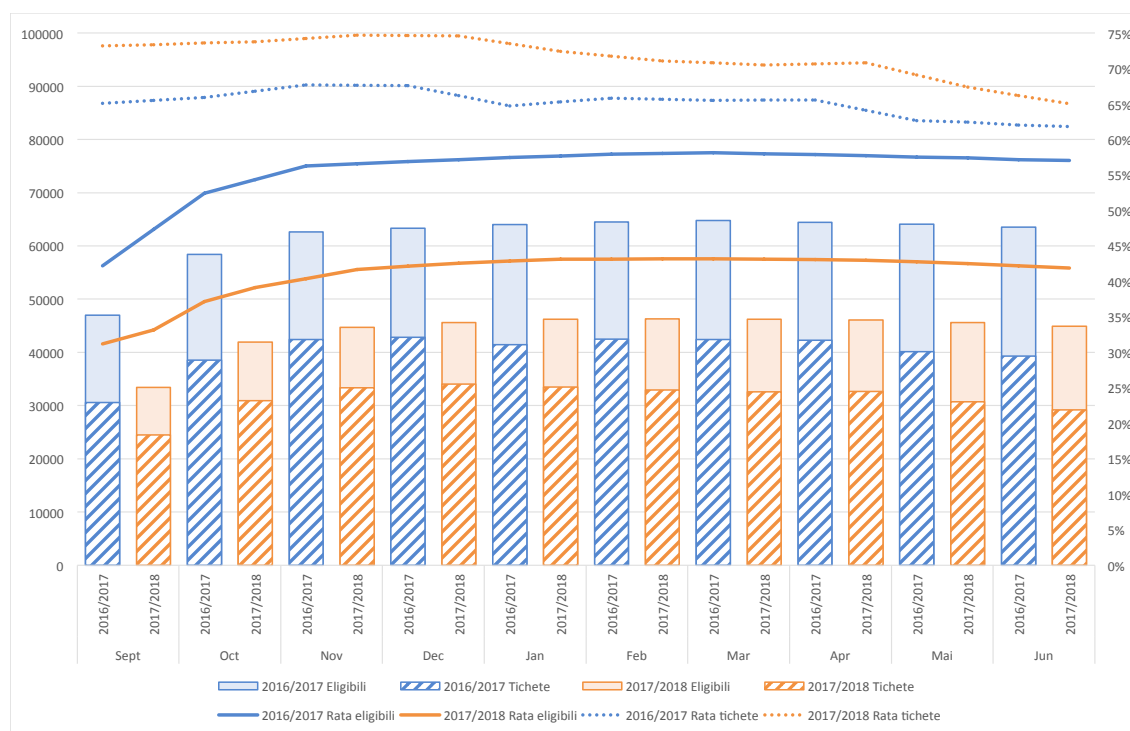
1. CONTEXT

Investments in early education are recognized internationally as the most effective in stimulating the human brain development and in reducing school abandonment among disadvantaged children. Romania has adopted various laws that stimulated children's participation in the education system from early ages. In 2010 the law introduced *clasa pregatitoare*, which made school enrollment mandatory from age 6. In 2015, law 248/2015 was adopted, and in 2018 the education law was changed in order to make preschool mandatory by 2023.

Law 248/2015 that stimulates impoverished children's participation in preschool education by providing incentives in form of food coupons conditional on attendance is being applied since February 2016, with public funds allocated from the state budget. The incentive is given through a national interest program that prevents early school abandonment, and is based on OvidiuRo's *Fiecare Copil în Grădiniță* pilot program, implemented for five years (2010-2015) in 45 communities.

The estimated number of children who could benefit from this law varies from 111.396 (2016) and 107.190 (2017). On average, however, between 70.000 children benefited from the law in 2016-2017) and below 46.500 children in 2017-2018 (between 62% and 43% from the children estimated as potential beneficiaries, from an income point of view. From them, on average between 65% and 71% attended preschool regularly.

Evolution of enrollment in the program/law and preschool attendance



In order for this law to reach its goal of increasing poor children's attendance in preschool, it must (1) reach all impoverished children that are estimated to be eligible from an income point of view and (2) have a monitoring and evaluation mechanism that insures the correct and effective use of public funds.

This study aims to throw more light regarding the reasons why so many children still do not benefit from the law and to make recommendations regarding how the implementation could be improved.

2. METHODOLOGY

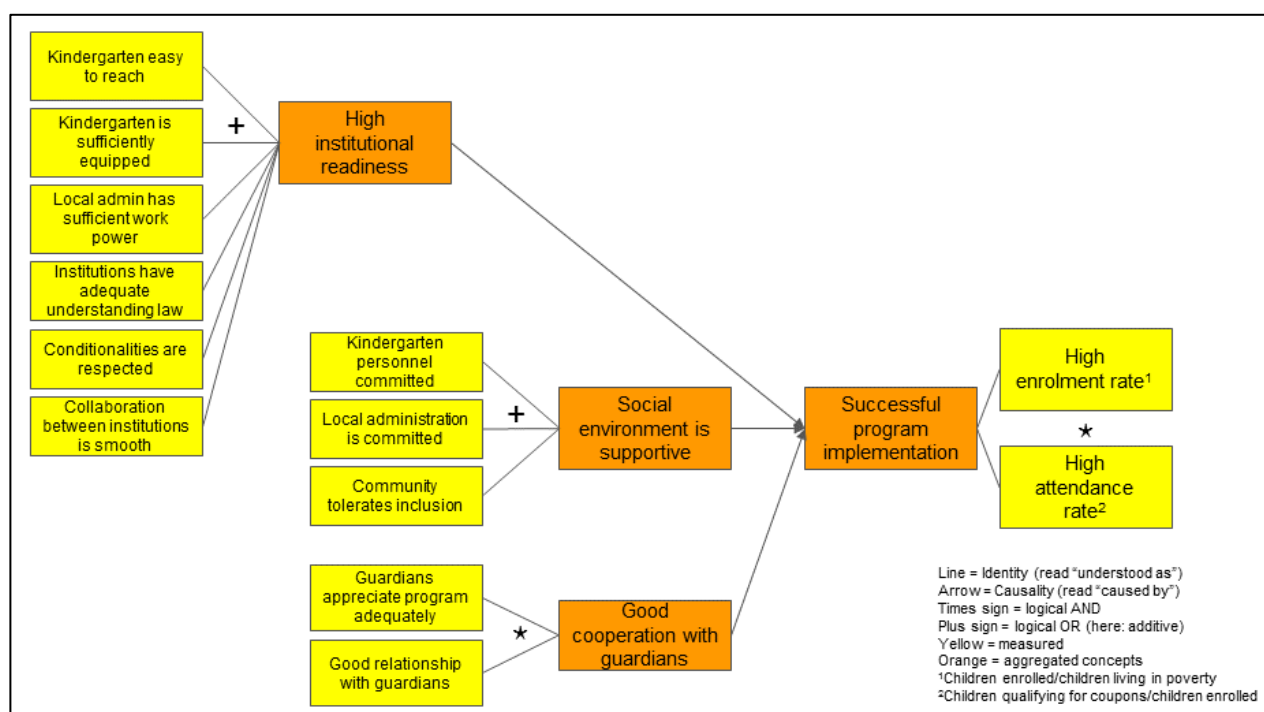
This study focuses on the conditions for the successful implementation of the program in municipalities across Romania. As managers responsible for the implementation of the pilot phase and external evaluators of its impact on participating children, members of our research team have acquired an intimate understanding of the *Fiecare Copil in Gradinita* program. To consolidate our insights and systematize our findings, we have developed a Theory of Change of the program.

Our premise was that by identifying the conditions that determine the successful implementation of the program, we will find out ways of support for the localities where the program is poorly executed.

How does success look like? In our view, the law is successful if (1) most children who fit the income threshold benefit from it (i.e. parents register the children to preschool and file a request for the food coupons) and (2) most children enrolled in the program attend preschool regularly (as per the rules set by the methodological norms) and receive food coupons. If in a municipality that we study we find that “High enrolment rate” or “High attendance rate” is not given, then in our understanding program implementation in that municipality cannot be called successful. In concrete terms, neither signing up many children that do not attend, nor having only a few children sign up that attend regularly represents a success. Our research was designed to find explanations for both aspects.

The theory of change we propose is that **three aspects of the program environment are pivotal in achieving an effective implementation of *Fiecare Copil in Gradinita*: (1) high institutional readiness, (2) a supportive social environment, and (3) good cooperation with parents.** We expect that if any one of these three conditions is not met then the program will be executed poorly. Each of these conditions for a successful program implementation consists of several facets that we will have to take into account to assess it properly¹. (Figure 1)

Figure 1 – Theory of Change for program implementation under Law 248/2015



¹ For each aspect we defined rules that allowed us to evaluate its presence or absence in each locality, according to the same criteria, and we assessed it with 0.00 (aspect completely absent), 0.33 (rather absent), 0.66 (rather present) or 1 (fully present).

² To select the case studies we crossed poverty data of children 3-5 years old, from the SAFIR database of the National Agency for

We believe that in order to call local institutions “highly ready” to implement the program, a whole set of issues related to their role in the program has to be assessed as overall favourable. First, the kindergarten must be easy to reach for most children. In our understanding, this happens when the kindergarten is close to most eligible children or when free transport for children is available. Second, the kindergarten has to be sufficiently equipped to receive additional children who enrol in the program. This refers to the space, personnel, and educational material available to the kindergarten. Third, the local administration must have enough work force to handle its tasks in the implementation of the program. Fourth, institutions must have an adequate understanding of the law and its application. Time and again, we have come across municipalities, in which ignorance of the law’s stipulations has led to misunderstandings that excluded substantial amounts of families from receiving support. Fifth, we believe that the conditionalities of the program have to be respected in order for its support mechanisms to work. This means in particular that attendance has to be noted down correctly. Finally, we contend that a good collaboration between the town hall and the kindergarten is pivotal in getting local institutions ready for program implementation. Only if most of these aspects are rated favourably in a given municipality, we will call the institutional environment in this municipality “highly ready” for program implementation.

Kindergarten personnel, public employees in the local administration, and the local community are important stakeholders of the program. We therefore believe that to adequately assess the social environment of the program, we have to take into account the attitudes and motivations of all three. In our experience, kindergarten teachers and public employees are able to sabotage the implementation of the program in many, often subtle ways. This includes not carrying out important tasks such as enrolment drives, or behaving towards disadvantaged families and children in such a way that they do not enrol in the program or do not attend kindergarten. At the same, if among these stakeholders, there are active proponents of the program, their personal engagement can make a tremendous positive difference. We therefore regard the commitment of kindergarten personnel and employees in the local administration as important success factors. In addition to that, we believe that the attitudes of better-off parents towards socio-economically marginalized families are important for an effective implementation of the program. If they engage in discriminatory behaviour in their day-to-day interactions, they demotivate disadvantaged parents to send their children to kindergarten. If they send their children to other kindergartens, for example in a nearby city, to avoid contact to the less fortunate peers of their children, they provide a strong disincentive to kindergarten teachers to reach out to disadvantaged children. It is therefore important that the community at least tolerates the inclusion of socio-economically marginalized children into local kindergartens. In order to call a social environment supportive, at least two of the three groups of stakeholders in a given municipality have to be assessed as supporting program implementation through their beliefs and actions.

Finally, we believe that a good cooperation with the target group of the program is necessary for the its successful implementation. Two aspects are important: (1) parents’ appreciation of the program, and (2) their relationship with the local kindergarten. The former refers to their factual understanding as well as their attitude towards preschool education. For example, misunderstandings or misinformation with regard to the conditionality of the program may lead to parents putting little value on their participation. The second aspect assesses the quality of the relationship between kindergarten teachers and socio-economically marginalized families. Only if it is characterized by mutual respect, it does not represent a hindering factor in program implementation. In sum, we will only speak of a good cooperation with the target group, if both aspects are present in a given municipality.

CASE SELECTION AND ANALYSIS

The study included 16 case studies² – localities from 6 counties, selected based on the program's success (high rate of children enrolled in the program and high rate of preschool attendance), and on two background factors: the degree of urbanization of a municipality and its level of poverty (both had emerged in a previous study as important explanatory factors for successful program implementation). In these localities, we interviewed over 90 social workers or city hall employees working on the law, preschool teachers or principals, and parents eligible for the program (receiving food coupons or not).

We looked at the data using the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), a set-theoretic method of data analysis that identifies necessary and sufficient conditions for outcome attainment. Thus, we found out that the three conditions that we analysed are sufficient together for the program's success – in other words, **in all the localities that had a high institutional readiness, an inclusive social environment and a good cooperation with parents, the program was successfully implemented.**

At the same time, the analysis showed us that **among these factors, a good cooperation with parents is particularly important.** By this we evaluated the extent to which parents understand the program (have heard about the law and know how to apply) and their relationship with teachers, social workers or school/health mediators. **No locality from our sample has implemented the program successful without children's parents being involved,** according to this definition. However, one could argue that **a good involvement of impoverished parents is rather a product of a high institutional readiness and an inclusive social environment, than an explanatory factor in itself.** After all, parents from the target group, with a low education level, do not decide to be well informed about the law, or not, or to establish a trust relationship with the authorities and school personnel. On the contrary, their only source of information about the law are the employees of the city hall and school. These employees' dedication is the one that decides whether they go towards the families in need, or not.

Can we, then, explain the success of the program only by institutional readiness and social environment? Can we home in on these broad aspects, that are the key to the successful enforcement of the law?

In a first step, we identified the most promising aspects for institutional readiness and social environment. In the second step, we combined them in a common analysis to identify alternative paths to success. Thus, we found out that from institutional readiness aspects, the most important is **the combination between a sufficient work force at the city hall and a good collaboration between city hall and kindergarten.** From aspects of social environment, the **combination between the motivation of the kindergarten personnel to apply the law and a community that tolerates inclusion** turned out to be the most important. Generally, the analysis showed that **in order to promote the success of the program, it is much more important to take into account the social environment than the institutional readiness.**

For the final analysis, we united these aspects. To the conditions described above (sufficient work force in city halls, good collaboration between city hall and kindergarten, motivated kindergarten personnel and a community that tolerates inclusion) we added the motivation of **city hall employees to apply the law.**

² To select the case studies we crossed poverty data of children 3-5 years old, from the SAFIR database of the National Agency for Payments and Social Inspection (Ministry of Labor) with data regarding the number of children enrolled in the program and their preschool attendance rate, from the SIIIR database of the Ministry of Education – both data sets were for Sept-Nov 2017 (the most recent data available at the time of the study). We sampled from all localities in Romania. As urban we categorized all towns or cities or localities situated less than 20 kilometres away from one. The degree of child poverty we estimated by dividing the number of impoverished 3-5 year olds who live in families which receive minimum guaranteed income (MGI) by the total number of children of that age, per locality. If the resulting percentage of poor children was higher than 35%, we categorized the degree of child poverty as high. For effectiveness of program implementation, we multiplied the enrolment rate with the attendance rate. If the resulting term was higher than 0.9, we categorized program implementation as successful. We estimated the enrolment rate by dividing the number of children enrolled in the program by the number of 3-5 year olds that live in families which receive MGI. The attendance rate we calculated by dividing the number of children who received a food coupon by the number of children enrolled in the program.

3. FINDINGS

We found four parallel pathways to the successful implementation of the program – which shows us there is no easy answer to the question of how we can reach success. For each path, a community that tolerates inclusion is a necessary condition. Also, improving the collaboration between institutions and increasing the motivation of the city hall or kindergarten's personnel play an important role in each path to success. At the same time, increasing tolerance, improving interinstitutional collaboration or increasing motivation among public employees are known as extremely difficult undertakings.

Path	Institutional readiness		Social environment			Successful program implementation	Cases covered
	City Hall: Work force	Collaboration	City Hall: Motivated personnel	Kindergarten: Motivated personnel	Tolerant community		
1	+	+	+		+	+	57%
2		+	+	-	+	+	29%
3	+	-		+	+	+	14%
4		-	+	+	+	+	14%

The first path indicates that four out of the seven localities where we found success were able to implement the program well because **they had sufficient workforce in the city hall, the city hall personnel was motivated to apply the law, and the community tolerated the inclusion of poor children in kindergartens**. For this path, the motivation of the kindergarten personnel does not play a role in achieving success.

The second path shows that two out of the seven localities that achieved success did so by having a **combination between a good interinstitutional collaboration, a city hall personnel dedicated to the law's mission and a tolerant community**, despite the fact the kindergarten personnel was not motivated to apply the law.

The third and fourth pathways, on the other hand, show that **the commitment of kindergarten personnel is necessary when collaboration between local institutions is bad**. In addition to the commitment of kindergarten teachers, both paths impose requirements regarding city hall personnel, too. For path three, city hall work force must be sufficient, for path four, city hall personnel have to be committed to the program mission. Again, for both paths, a tolerant community is required.

Therefore, from our analysis **two types of successful cases** emerge. First, there are those cases where the **city hall appears to be the driver of effective program implementation** (paths 1 and 2). Here, the town hall personnel is committed to the program mission, and – by maintaining a good collaboration with local kindergartens – is able to enroll substantial numbers of children in the program that attend regularly. This type of case is much more frequent.

Second, there are those cases where the **kindergarten personnel is driving program implementation through their commitment to the program mission**. They succeed in this even though collaboration with the town hall is bad. Necessary, however, are either a sufficient work force or commitment among personnel of the town hall.

The final analysis shows that there are more ways in which the program can be successfully implemented, but for all of them it is necessary to have (1) a tolerant community and (2) at least one public institution, ideally the city hall, but possibly also the school, that takes on the role of driver for the program.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

A synthesis of recommendations:

1. **National monitoring and evaluation**, by continuing research and creating an annual analysis mechanism;
2. **Involve county public authorities and institutions in monitoring and mentoring city hall and kindergarten employees;**
3. **Revise and simplify the law and methodological norms** regarding eligibility, filing the application for the law, and meeting administrative requests;
4. **A better information of all (city hall employees, teachers, parents) about the law.**

I. Recommendations for parent involvement:

1. **National awareness campaign to inform parents** regarding the law and the important of preschool education for ALL children (public utility message sent by the ministries to inform all parents)³.
2. **Revise the law and norms and simplify the methodology for accessing the food coupons**
 - a. **Modify the implementation norms in order to consider eligible by default the children enrolled in preschool, from families who benefit from MGI and/or family support allowance (FSA), that are below the eligibility threshold** (and giving them an opt-out option). Given the fact that these children are anyway eligible from an income point of view, eliminating the parents request would ensure from the start a higher number of children enrolled in the program (from the children already enrolled in preschool, whose parents didn't know about the law), would eliminate cases when these parents do not apply for the law because they do not know how to file the application, and would ease the workload of social workers.
 - b. **Urge city halls to use the PatrimVen software**, which allows social workers to obtain parents income data directly from the financial authorities, without making parents go to towns (sometimes hardly accessible) to get an income statement, and would simplify parents' efforts to apply for the law. This application is free, but not all city halls use it.
3. **Include in the norms clear responsibilities of social workers and teachers** to inform and counsel parents regarding the law and the importance of preschool education, to identify and enroll in preschool the children who are eligible for the law and to support parents in filing the application – to reduce cases where children do not benefit from the law because the parents didn't know about it or were not able to apply for it⁴.
4. **Do an impact analysis regarding the opportunity to change the law to increase the income threshold for eligibility (now 284 lei/family member/month) and the value of the food coupons (now 50 lei/child/month).** Both remained at the same level as in 2015, although the minimum income and inflation have raised. An option worth analysing would be to include all children from families receiving FSA (threshold: 530 lei/family member/month).

³ OvidiuRo initially promoted the law through this TV spot: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=yiKDiwXhCpA and explain the logic of the pilot program in this way: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=12&v=Wk5utG2Ftpk. These models could be used and extended to reach different categories and parents and public employees.

⁴ Currently, the implementation norms stipulate that the food coupons are given based on parents' request, but do not include any responsibilities for the public employees in the directions described above.

II. 1. Recommendations for increasing the level of institutional readiness:

- i. **To have enough workforce at city hall level⁵:**
 1. **Simplify the bureaucratic steps needed to process parents' applications for the law** (reduce the workload of social workers):
 - a. **Information campaign among city hall employees**, to clarify the eligibility conditions and mandatory paperwork (a better information would avoid doubled efforts that social workers currently do in order to be sure, when there are not sure how to read the law).
 - b. **Digitalize social inquiries/the data collection process in communities**, for all social benefits (this would significantly ease the work of social workers to interpret and update the files, and to monitor the beneficiaries).
 2. **Support city halls with many beneficiaries of social aid and a small staff** – these could be prioritized by the Ministry of Labor when implementing projects with European funds or when they design public policies in the social field.
 3. **Share specialized human resources in social work**, whenever these are not available locally.
- ii. **To have a better collaboration between local institutions (city hall – kindergarten/school):**
 1. **At central level, form a common analysis and monitoring team for the law, with specialists from the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labor.**
 - a. **Annual impact analysis** on how the law is applied. Detail the analysis to include other aspects that could increase the impact of the law.
 - b. **Regular monitoring and evaluation** – see the sample of the monitoring tool proposed as a result of this study.
 2. **At county level, form common monitoring and mentorship teams** for the law: (1) involve County School Inspectorates in monitoring and supporting teachers and (2) involve the county social welfare institutions (AJPIIS and DGASPC) in monitoring and supporting social workers.
 3. **At local level, introduce common responsibilities for the city hall and kindergarten personnel**, particularly regarding the enrollment of poor children to preschool and in the program. This could be done in an integrated way with the Ministry of Labor's Integrated Community Services project that is being implemented starting September 2018.

II. 2. Recommendations to stimulate an inclusive social environment

- i. **To increase motivation of kindergarten personnel regarding the law:**
 1. **Involve school inspectorates** – support and motivation of teachers and principals.
 2. **Ease teachers efforts:**
 - a. **Provide school supplies in kindergartens, for the children eligible for the law** – funds for this have already been allocated through POAD (the European Commission's Aid Program for Disadvantaged People). The Ministry of Education should hurry the implementation of this program so that it applies during this school year. This would eliminate an important financial burden that now falls on teachers, when the parents cannot contribute.
 3. **Single attendance catalogue**, as per law 248/2015 format – currently two attendance taking instruments are being used, which doubles teachers attendance taking efforts.
 - a. **Clarifications sent by the Ministry of Education to kindergartens**, to avoid misunderstandings that could exclude children (such as parents being wrongly informed that their children are disqualified from food coupons if they have even one absence).
 4. **Campaigns to make kindergarten personnel more inclusive.**
 5. **Specify in the methodological norms responsibilities for teachers, school mediators and school inspectors in applying the law, and include sanctions if these are not respected.** Such as clear responsibilities for teachers to identify and enroll children, monitoring and evaluation responsibilities for school inspectors.

⁵ Public Social Assistance Services (SPAS) from city halls generally have a small staff, often improperly trained and with a high workload). The procedures for Law 248/2015, although not excessively burdensome, do imply a volume of work for social workers, which could be simplified.

- ii. **To increase the communities tolerance regarding the inclusion of impoverished children:**
 1. **National information and awareness campaign regarding the importance of preschool education for all children** – messages that increase tolerance and empathy both among parents who are better off, and among kindergarten and city hall personnel.
 2. **Written recommendations from the Ministry of Education to run inclusive education activities in schools and kindergartens** (common meeting sessions and activities with all parents, inclusive education trainings for teachers and school personnel, common extracurricular activities etc.).
 3. **Stimulate an attitude of respect towards impoverished parents and children from the public authorities side** – long term behaviour change programs can be created for public employees, for example by developing Local Action Groups.

III. Recommendations to increase the motivation of city hall employees:

1. **Involve mayors in the campaign of increasing the impact of the law** – information campaign in city halls.
2. **Mentor and inform better the city hall employees regarding the methodology**, to ease their workload and increase their comfort in applying the law – this could be initiated by the Ministry of Labor, through the County Payment and Social Inspection Agencies and through the General Directions of Social Assistance and Child Protection, in partnership with the Prefectures. A series of clarifications sent by the ministries to the city halls regarding the norms could avoid misunderstandings that can exclude the children (such as social workers who did not understand that they should not take into account property when calculating the eligibility of parents, or understood they need to request original identity papers from both parents at registration – which excludes children with one parent left abroad to work).
3. **Positive motivation methods** – given the fact that during our interviews we haven't met even one social workers to say that the law, per se, is not good and needed, although some mentioned a high workload in general, we believe more detailed analysis should be carried out to understand the motivations of social workers. Their lack of motivation could be explained by the high workload (in which case measures to reduce paperwork would help indirectly), low salary, lack of appreciation from their superiors, parents and community at large etc.
4. **Specify in the methodological norms clear responsibilities of city hall personnel in applying the law and include sanctions** – such as the social workers responsibility to make sure that all the parents who benefit from MGI and FSA are informed regarding the law, or their obligation to participate in campaigns to identify and enroll children in the program, together with teachers.