TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR INDIVIDUAL CONSULTANTS AND CONTRACTORS

Title		Type of engagement	Duty Station:
Coordinator of the Regional Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) Network		☒ Consultant ☐ UNOPS ICA	Belgrade, Serbia Home based.

Purpose of Activity/Assignment: The purpose of the assignment is to support the UNICEF Serbia and the Institute for Early Childhood Development and Inclusion (IECDI) in the Republic of Serbia to jointly lead and strengthen the Regional Early childhood intervention (ECI) Network for Europe and Central Asia. The consultant will provide guidance and technical assistance to UNICEF Serbia and the IECDI to strengthen cooperation and participation within the network, facilitate the exchange and learning process, transfer of good practices among members (policy makers and practitioners) and to develop and implement joint initiatives. With the expert support of the consultant, UNICEF country offices and governments in the region will strengthen ECI systems and enhance availability of contemporary, family-centred ECI services provided by transdisciplinary teams, to children at risk of or with delays and disabilities and their families. For this assignment, **UNICEF Serbia is seeking to engage a consultant with extensive expertise in early childhood intervention and early inclusion of children with developmental delays and disabilities and experience within the country and the region.**

Background:

Many countries in Europe and Central Asia (ECA) are increasingly focusing on expanding or strengthening their provisions for early childhood intervention (ECI) for children at risk of or with developmental delays and disabilities in line with contemporary, evidence-based principles and practice. Building strong and effective early childhood intervention systems, however, involves a paradigm shift in how ECI is conceptualized, organized and delivered from practice and system level perspective. Currently, in all countries in the region early support for children with developmental difficulties is shifting from solely medical approach to the one based on the science of child development, the child's family context and holistic needs. The shift to the new contemporary perspective on ECI, requires building a cross-sectoral ecosystem that supports services, practices and policies that build on partnership with parents and are guided by the family priorities, strengths and needs. These services should deliver individualized and holistic support for enhancing child development and functioning in the child's natural environments.

Recognizing the value of ECI for children, families and communities alike, UNICEF Regional office for Europe and Central Asia (ECARO) established a Regional ECI Network to build the region's core technical capacity for ECI policy and practice, and to support country-level efforts to develop national, evidence-based, family-centred ECI systems. The Regional ECI Network now brings together more than 150 members from 24 countries and territories — 101 representing national governments and partners, and 55 UNICEF staff — and until now was coordinated by UNICEF ECARO. A regional Technical Advisory Group (TAG) of 15 international ECI experts are convened by ECARO, to provide voluntary technical guidance to the Regional ECI Network's members and activities.

In order to ensure sustainability of the Regional ECI Network and increased ownership by the countries, within the changing international environment and the need to preserve Network's relevance to the countries that are at the frontier of ECI reform, with the need to build on comparatively mature and better-resourced public systems, ECARO has recommended transfer of Network's leadership to one of the countries. Serbia, as part of ECA region, has been recognized as optimal hosting country for the future functioning and development of Regional ECI Network because of several reasons: achieved results in expansion and intersectoral cooperation in provision of ECI services; strong in-house capacity on ECI in UNICEF Serbia and the establishment of the IECDI as a regional hub for exchange of knowledge and good practices in ECI among the countries.

The key priority areas of UNICEF ECI programming and therefore the established Regional ECI Network are broadly defining the Scope of Work of the consultant and include the following objectives:

- Raising awareness and building shared understanding of the importance of ECI and advocacy at regional, sub-regional and national level to enhance commitment and investment in ECI services.
- Building national mechanisms and structures to facilitate collaboration across health, education and social welfare sector to ensure coordinated approach to ECI and the needs of families.
- Technically support Governments and professionals for policies, strategic plans and/or legislation, including the development of guidelines and procedures, service, personnel and performance standards, funding mechanisms.
- Strengthening capacity building of ECI practitioners across sectors, development of system for professional development pre and in-service, including engagement with Academia and other relevant actors.

- Strengthening capacity building of medical professionals (paediatricians, nurses and other professionals at the primary healthcare (PHC) level) to identify developmental delays early and participate in provision of ECI services through provision of health care, monitoring, outreach, timely referral etc.
- Introduction and scale up of innovations in ECI, including for electronic record, data collection, assistive technologies and remote ECI provision.
- Increassing and strengthening partnerships between key stakeholders such as national and local policy actors, institutions, academia, professional associations, civil society, parental associations and parents themselves in supporting quality ECI system

These objectives would be achieved through the following actions:

- Facilitating cooperation and knowledge sharing across the countries in the region, policy/professionals/parents' specific cross-country connections and exchange, to strengthen policy making and practice aligned with the family-centred principles.
- Ensuring timely updates on regional and global advancements in ECI policy and practice, along with access to relevant evidence, research, and technical materials;
- Creating a mechanism for obtaining customised technical guidance on context specific challenges/issues, enriched by the shared expertise within the network and the TAG's international expert group.
- Supporting capacity building opportunities for the members of the network
- Keeping update on the ECI system development in the member countries and initiating and technically supporting multi and/or inter-country activities that can respond to the needs of specific/group of countries, including fundraising opportunities
- Strengthening partnerships around the Regional ECI Network
- Technically supporting IECDI to co-lead the network with UNICEF Serbia and become regional and subregional ECI hub, including supporting national and local capacities to advance their policy and practice and readiness to demonstrate good practice examples to countries in the region Supporting Serbia inter-sectorial participation in the Regional ECI Network and fulfilment of national priorities through their engagement within the network

Key Tasks for the consultancy

1. Develop annual plan of activities of the Regional ECI Network based on the needs of member countries and recommendations for strengthening the network through participatory process with countries
2. Support IECDI establish internal mechanisms that can jointly with UNICEF co-lead the Network and activities related to the Network, with defined roles and responsibilities, and jointly develop annual plan for capacity building of the IECDI to co-lead network and become regional and subregional hub (including activities that can support national and local capacities to advance their policy and practice and readiness to demonstrate good practice examples to the countries in the region)
3. Organize jointly with IECDI, quarterly online meetings on themes identified by Network members and share new ECI resources across the Network (as part of the annual plan);
4. Support functioning of the Regional ECI Network:
   a) Facilitate the engagement of Regional TAG experts in the Network's work and maintain regular communication with members on resources, developments and collaboration opportunities;
   b) Regularly update the ECI resources in the Regional ECI Network database and share with countries;
   c) Update on the database on the ECI system development in the countries to guide priorities of the Regional ECI Network
   d) Promote the Regional ECI Network and establish new partnerships with the Network and IECDI as co-leader of the Network
   e) Strengthen targeted cross-country support and exchange mechanisms between policy actors, professionals and parents as part of the Regional ECI Network
   f) Recognise and initiate new advocacy opportunities, research processes, joint fundraising opportunities and other activities between and with the group of countries, including through EU financial and technical assistance instruments
5. Technically support strengthening of ECI national systems by contributing to development of ECI Law and ECI Roadmap in Serbia and other countries in the region, benefitting from the Regional ECI Network and TAG engagement (as part of the annual plan);
6. Strengthen technical capacity of ECI professionals across countries in the region through dedicated learning resources and training support organised through the network, through webinars (as part of the annual plan);

7. Develop/facilitate development of new regional policy briefs on the topics relevant to the countries in the Network (as part of the annual plan);
8. Provide, jointly with IECDI, direct technical support to the countries with resources, guidance and connections (as per request).
9. Provide, jointly with IECD, support to ECI network in Serbia as per the draft plan developed.
10. Develop recommendations for sustainability of the Regional ECI Network beyond 2027

Performance indicators for evaluation of results:

The performance of work will be evaluated based on the following indicators:

- Completion of tasks specified in the ToR.
- Compliance with the established deadlines for submission of deliverables.
- Quality of deliverables.
- Demonstration of high standards of work.

Contract duration: 15 November 2026 to 31 December 2027

Contractual modalities:

- **Location**: The consultants will be home-based while cooperating directly with the IECDI staff.
- **Payment**: UNICEF will issue a contract in RSD. The payment will be made in RSD by bank transfer based on the completion and quality of the deliverables agreed via submission of invoice. If the reports and documents are not submitted per the deliverables and timeframe stated in this TOR, the payments will be withheld. UNICEF reserves the right to withhold all or a portion of payment if performance is unsatisfactory, if work/outputs is incomplete, not delivered or for failure to meet deadlines. All materials developed will remain the copyright of UNICEF and UNICEF will be free to adapt and modify them in the future.
- **Reporting**: The consultants will be supervised by and will report to UNICEF Serbia Health and ECD Specialist. Regular emails and calls will be used for planning and to update the supervisors.

Applications

Interested applicants should submit:

1. **An online application**
2. **A financial offer, with a lumpsum fee in RSD based on a total of 45 working days to undertake the ToR. Should travel take place a travel line will be included in the contract as per UNICEF rules on consultants travel.**

Work Assignment Overview			
Tasks/Milestone	**Deliverables/Outputs**	**No. of Days**	**Timeline**
1. Develop annual plan of activities of the Regional ECI Network based on the needs of member countries and recommendations for strengthening the network through participatory process with countries	Annual plan of activities of the Regional ECI Network and recommendations for strengthening the network	2 days	Nov. 2026
2. Support IECDI establish internal mechanisms that can jointly with UNICEF co-lead the Network and activities related to the Network, with defined roles and responsibilities, and jointly develop annual plan for capacity building of the IECDI to co-lead network and become regional and subregional hub (including activities that can support national and local capacities to advance their policy and practice and readiness to demonstrate good practice examples to the countries in the region)	Annual plan for capacity building of the IECDI to co-lead network and become regional and subregional hub	3 days	Dec. 2026
3. Organize jointly with IECDI, quarterly online meetings on themes identified by Network members and share new ECI resources across the Network - preparation of the meetings, communication with the members and COs' focal points, development of the program, presentations, if needed, communication with potential speakers (as part of the annual plan);	4 meetings organised – agenda, ppts, reports	8 days (2 days per mtg)	Feb, May, Sept, Nov 2027
4. Support functioning of the Regional ECI Network: a) Facilitate the engagement of Regional TAG experts in the Network's work and maintain regular communication with members on resources, developments and collaboration opportunities; b) Regularly update the ECI resources in the Regional ECI Network database and share with countries; c) Update on the database on the ECI system development in the countries to guide priorities of the Regional ECI Network d) Promote the Regional ECI Network and establish new partnerships with the Network and IECDI as co-leader of the Network e) Strengthen targeted cross-country support and exchange mechanisms between policy actors, professionals and parents as part of the Regional ECI Network f) Recognise and initiate new advocacy opportunities, research processes, joint fundraising opportunities and other activities between and with the group of	Monthly report on functioning of the network, liaisons, partnerships, recommendations etc.	7 days (app. half day a month)	Through out Nov 2026 - 2027

countries, including through EU financial and technical assistance instruments			
5. Technically support strengthening of ECI national systems by contributing to development of ECI Law and ECI Roadmap in Serbia and other countries in the region, benefitting from the Regional ECI Network and TAG engagement (as part of the annual plan);	Report on technical contribution – inputs, advocacy gains for the draft ECI law and ECI Roadmap	4 days	Dec 2026 - February 2027
6. Strengthen technical capacity of ECI professionals across countries in the region through dedicated learning resources and training support organised through the network, through webinars (as part of the annual plan);	At least 2 learning webinars organised for the network	4 days	2027
7. Develop/facilitate development of new regional policy briefs on the topics relevant to the countries in the Network (as part of the annual plan);	At least 1 brief developed	3 days	June 2027
8. Provide, jointly with IECDI, direct technical support to the countries with resources, guidance and connections: on strategic and policy documents (concept notes, strategies, action plans, legislation, roadmaps, policy recommendations, model of ECI), financing and costing, professional development and service standards etc. review of documents, selection of available resources, technical support for national country level discussions, including program development and if requested presentations or input to the discussions, liaison with other countries.	At least 4 countries supported through targeted support	8 days	2027
9. Provide, jointly with IECD, technical support to ECI network in Serbia as per the draft plan developed.	TBD based on the plan	5 days	2027
10. Develop recommendations for sustainability of the Regional ECI Network beyond 2027	Recommendations for Network sustainability	1 day	2027
Total number of days		**45 days**	