

Child rights in Serbia

Serbia has undergone a profound transformation since the cold war ended 20 years ago, and despite enduring more than a decade of political turmoil, it is making steady progress in improving outcomes for children in primary health care and education.

At just 8 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2007, its under-five mortality rate is one of the lowest in the CEE/CIS region. Routine immunization, measured by the percentage of infants receiving three doses of diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus toxoid vaccine, stood at 94 per cent. Almost 99 per cent of its population has access to improved drinking-water facilities, and 92 per cent have access to adequate sanitation. Education is readily accessible, with net primary school attendance at 98 per cent in 2000–2007, and net secondary school attendance at 90 per cent for both girls and boys.

Children still vulnerable to social exclusion and lack of parental care

Despite these gains, poverty, disparities and high levels of social exclusion among vulnerable groups remain pressing concerns. Children living in rural areas and the less developed parts of the country are at risk of being excluded from essential services and protection not only because of income but also because of sociocultural poverty and discrimination. More than 155,000 children are living below the national poverty line, with a similar number at risk of falling into poverty. Among the Roma, one of the country's largest ethnic minorities, under-five mortality is more than three times higher than the national average.

In addition, in its concluding observations on child rights in Serbia in 2008, the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern regarding the large number of Serbian children with disabilities who remain institutionalized. Research

shows that children living in institutions are particularly vulnerable to neglect, abuse and violence and that these risks may increase for those who also live with disability. A recent study of the situation in Serbia by Mental Disabilities Rights International found that children with disabilities in residential care are segregated from society and forced to live in institutions throughout their lives. They often lack skilled caregivers and are not integrated into the education system.

Establishing a framework of protection

The Government of Serbia has developed national strategies and action plans to reduce the risk of social exclusion. The overall framework for enhancing child protection is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and incorporates key strategic documents, including Serbia's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper and its National Plan of Action for Children. The plan of action sets targets to reduce child poverty, provide quality education, protect the rights of children deprived of parental care and establish a comprehensive system of protection from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect.

The Government of Serbia is also implementing strategies to care for and protect vulnerable children. The 2007–2015 Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities includes programmes aimed at expanding access to essential services, protection and participation for children living with disability, while the framework of the 2005–2015 Roma Decade focuses on social protection for Roma children. A juvenile justice code adopted in 2006 outlines provisions to protect children who are in conflict with the law.

Galvanizing reform

For the past five years, the Government of Serbia has taken steps towards

reforming its social protection system through its Social Welfare Development Strategy. Deinstitutionalization is one of the main goals of the reform process, which requires setting up a network of community-based social services, with corresponding standards to ensure quality of care. Positive trends have been observed since implementation of the plan; for example, the number of children without parental care in residential institutions has been reduced, with a corresponding increase in foster placements. The deinstitutionalization of children with disabilities, however, is still nascent.

To galvanize the reform process, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy recently signed a memorandum of understanding with UNICEF. The four main strategic goals include transformation of all residential institutions for children; new standards of accountability for professionals for protection of child rights; inter-municipal, decentralized plans for community-based support services for families and children; and the establishment of specialized foster care for children with disabilities.

The Government of Serbia is making determined strides to promote and protect the rights of the child, despite emerging pressures from the global economic crisis. In addition to the reform of its social protection system, it is seeking to build a national child protection system that connects legislation, budgets, policies, programmes and research. A major challenge lies in implementing this inter-sectoral approach to ensure access to the continuum of services, protection and participation for all children, particularly those who are currently excluded due to discrimination, neglect and poverty.

See References, pages 90–92.