

## Belarus

### Update on the context and situation of children

In 2019 Belarus' economy faced sluggish growth as experienced globally, with the WB estimate of a 1% medium-term GDP growth, which is too low to measurably raise living standards. Over the last four years, Belarus' birth rate decreased 21%, resulting in a larger workforce versus dependent population. However, in 15-20 years, the situation will shift, requiring a smaller workforce population to care for a greater dependent population. These factors underscore the need for judicious investments now at a time of fewer dependents, which could effectively capacitate the next generation workforce to be better prepared to look after a larger dependent population.

While Belarus' human development index reflects strong efforts to strengthen social protection systems and strive for equity, being rated 50 out of 189 countries, there remain gaps in behaviour and system responses that create development risks across a child's lifecycle.

Social assistance for families, particularly with young children is strong, however challenges exist for children with developmental needs due to limited access to coordinated and inclusive early childhood development (ECD) and early childhood education (ECE) services. National data (2018) showed that only 44.6% of children 0-3 years have access to ECE, versus 96.5% for 3-6 years old. MICS 2019 revealed inequity in accessing ECE services by young children from low-income families (80%), living in rural areas (84,8%), or having functional difficulties (72,8%). Children who do not attend ECE are less on track in numeracy and socio-emotional domains. These effects may be reflected in MICS6 results on early childhood development index, where only 37% of 2-4 year olds were reported developmentally on track in literacy-numeracy and 84% in social-emotional skills.

Families require greater support to build their nurturing skills. For example, results from MICS 6 showed that while only 9% of mothers or other caregivers think that physical punishment is necessary to raise or educate children, 26% respondents reported using physical punishment discipline for children 1-14 years over a one-month period. This data suggests that parents lack critical information for proper care for their children and that even when they have correct knowledge, their behaviour does not reflect this understanding.

Opportunities to address these risks are developing with the Government's planning for a national ECD strategy, providing the catalyst for coordinated, intersectoral ECD and ECE services where mothers and fathers become key partners.

Adolescence also brings heightened challenges; risky lifestyle behaviours increase adolescents' vulnerabilities, with 58% of boys and 48% girls (15 to 19-year olds) having consumed alcohol at some point, and of these 12% and 8% respectively within the last 7 days. Adolescents also face high levels of depression symptoms (18.2% of 15-19 year olds), as well as exposure to violence, where 50.8% of 13-17 old students of general secondary education establishments experienced physical or psychological violence in school environments during the last year. Ways in which adolescent girls and boys face violence are also gender-based and require targeted interventions. Adolescents lack knowledge about risks and available services, which is compounded by lack of skills such as stress management or how to deal with social pressure.

System responses are also failing adolescents, with punitive justice responses particularly regarding drug-related crimes. Limited restorative approaches exist for adolescents without diversion or probation as options and with risks of long pre-detention periods. National legislation provides the same terms of pre-detention both for children and adults, with the maximum of 18 months. In 2018, 11,245 children (2,595 girls and 8,650 boys) who violated administrative provisions were also placed on surveillance lists under the Ministry of Interior, frequently resulting in them being stigmatized or excluded from future opportunities including access to certain types of jobs. Over five years, the number of sexual-related crimes committed against children rose significantly (70% girls; 30 % boys), with a 7-fold increase in pedophilia cases (from 116 in 2014 to 831 in 2018) of which 80% happened through Internet. Furthermore, 41% of children surveyed on their online experiences stated that they came across information that upset or scared them, and 29.9% had been insulted or humiliated on the internet.

PISA results for 2018 placed Belarus slightly under the average across EU countries, with a larger gap in performance of socio-economically advantaged versus disadvantaged students. The education curriculum focuses on imparting knowledge which is critical but has insufficient attention to the development of 21st century skills (e.g. skills for learning, life and career development, ICT, media and financial literacy).

In 2019, critical in-roads to address these risks were advanced through a strengthened public dialogue on restorative justice practices and development of a national concept of J4C; a national assessment on adolescents' mental health was conducted with commitment from the Government to establish a roadmap for action; and greater attention to increase online safety and to integrate 21st century skills into system responses. Involvement of more than 8,000 volunteers from across Belarus to the 2nd European Games accelerated youth participation and volunteering opportunities. The EuroGames

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' legacy is the Government's commitment to advance volunteering engagement opportunities, with establishment of volunteer centres throughout the oblasts.

Disability issues also remain factors for children's vulnerabilities across the lifecycle. Despite the Government's strong political commitment to provide social assistance, multiple institutional, attitudinal and structural barriers remain; 27 to 61 % of children with disabilities experience challenges with service accessibility; 34% of CWD are not attending educational institutions because of 'medical contraindications' which underscore existing stigma and discrimination; and they face greater poverty risks, where only 34% of these families having both parents working and 20% having neither working. CWD are disproportionately affected by institutional care, comprising 49% of the approximately 7058 children in residential care, and have faced fewer benefits in the Government's de-institutionalization process. The three ministries' action plan to CWD developed in early 2019 was an important step, yet a clear strategy on de-institutionalization is required that coordinates responses across the three ministries.

Moving into 2020, the Government needs to accelerate its commitments to address these risks for children and adolescents, building stronger investments and continuing to advance its SDG agenda.

### Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF in Belarus upholds the 2030 Agenda's principles, focusing on the most vulnerable children with the core commitment to leave no child behind. Attention is on cross-cutting issues -- disability, violence, justice, mental well-being and vulnerabilities of adolescent & youth -- to close gaps of inequity among child and youth groups and to establish protective and inclusive environments. UNICEF's work is coordinated with key government strategies, state programmes, and actions plans.

Collaborating with state and CSO colleagues, the country office (CO) has built partnerships across communities and advanced an evidence-base on key child rights which have contributed in efforts to leverage resources and scale-up programming strategies.

#### **Accelerating Partnerships:**

Over the last three years, the CO has strived to broaden public and private partnerships which create channels for engagement in child rights: leveraging resources for children; and raising awareness and opportunities for public engagement on child rights issues to strengthen UNICEF's advocacy positions.

*Private Sector:* To ensure long-term sustainability of its programme results, the CO solidified its efforts to leverage the power of business for children with key business entities. One example is Prior Bank which expanded collaboration to its leasing business as well as the individual campaign, "A Family for Every Child." Funding was raised through an individual ATM and electronic banking donation, with a long-term partnership that focused on family support and particularly families with children with disabilities. UNICEF's partnership with Prior Bank involved employee engagement and built a child rights dialogue, reaching 7 million people through online, radio and TV channels.

Another example is the CO's social responsibility partnership with MTS, which was broadened from a country-wide interactive online safety exhibition, "Children on the Internet," to include access for individual fundraising initiatives such as MTS application development, UNICEF visuals in MTS stores, and planned activities with employees. Through the online exhibition, the CO with MTS conducted a survey which enabled more than 7997 children to share their online experiences and inform further programming strategies. The CO also partnered with MTS and the Athletics Federation to organize a children's run within Minsk's annual half-marathon, attracting 2,000 participants and bringing the attention of children's interests to a sports audience of approximately 40,000 people.

At the same time, engagement of Belarusian celebrities involved in activities such as a social inclusion campaign and participation in annual GALA dinner events, increased reach for child rights messages across the community. In the fourth annual Gala dinner, more than 30 partners were engaged, raising attention to the specific needs of children with disabilities.

In 2019, the CO established an advisory board, comprising business people and other high-level community figures, to serve as a sounding board for the office's strategic planning. Initiated in June, the CO had two advisory meetings over the year, with plans for quarterly meetings in the future. Advisory board members provide critical insights to the office's programming, particularly on growing collaboration among the private sector as well as enabling broader reach to community members with different experiences.

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UNICEF Belarus collaborated with Government and private partners for the celebration of the 30th Anniversary for the Convention on the Rights of the Child and World Children's Day, turning iconic buildings in Minsk blue to stand up for child rights. The CO also hosted UNICEF Talks, a platform for youth to talk about important issues to peers and learn about key articles in the convention.

Through these initiatives, the CO strived to foster a donation culture with greater employee engagement and systematic donations for long-term partnerships. These initiatives are not only directed to increase financial resources for child rights but established 'channels' for outreach about child rights to different groups across communities with UNICEF as a convener for their broader engagement on child rights.

*Sports:* Minsk's hosting of the 2nd European Games created the momentum for the office to accelerate its work with volunteers as well as on sports for development. Applying the winning support for cause of children strategy, the CO partnered with UNICEF HQ's Global Volunteer Initiative which provided training capacity as well as resources. Collaborating with the Minsk European Games Organizing Committee (MEGOC), as the Games' non-commercial social legacy partner, the CO developed an online basic child rights training for the Game's more than 8,000 volunteers. UNICEF Representative, Rashed Mustafa, and UNICEF influencers or long-time supporters participated in the torch bearing ceremony, raising attention to social inclusion and the role of sports for all, "not just for medals." At the same time, social inclusion messages were also advanced through children's zones in the Games' fan zones across 10 locations in Belarus, reaching thousands of children and their parents. For 2020, the CO is striving to expand its volunteer outreach to 1,000 young people across Belarus and will further collaborate with the National Volunteer Centre under the Ministry of Education.

The office also leveraged the energy to expand its sports for development initiatives. Continuing to build its partnership with existing clubs such as Dinamo Minsk Hockey and Association of Belarusian Football Federation (ABFF), the office also has been building new collaborations with partners such as the Bate Borisov Football Club and the National Olympic Committee. Working with programme colleagues, sports was used as a tool for integration in programming of justice for children and adolescent participation. At the same time, sports has also been used to strengthen positive parenting messages. For example, responsible parenting was a main goal in the ABFF and UNICEF joint project, "Family Football Festival," which stimulated families to spend more leisure time together doing sports and physical activities. Over 1100 families and 4000 participants were involved in the project's 27 festivals with most events carried out in regions and small towns. In 2020, the programme team and sports for development specialist will continue to explore ways for more closely weaving sports into programmatic strategies.

### **Establishing Evidence-based Foundations:**

Partnering with the national statistics service, BelStat, and other state agencies, the CO continued to build the country's capacity for monitoring child rights by leveraging resources that improve the availability of disaggregated data to better serve knowledge and evidence generation specifically on child vulnerabilities.

Over 2019, BelStat in collaboration with UNICEF conducted MICS6, with data from 8668 households and a 97.5% response rate. For Belarus, MICS serves as a key tool for monitoring SDGs for children, producing approximately 150 indicators including 20 SDG indicators, as well as contributing critical evidence for the office and government partners in planning, decision-making and other child rights monitoring.

At the same time, the CO continued to use the power of evidence to drive change, with generated evidence informing programming and policies. In collaboration with the MOH and MOE, the CO conducted a study on parents' and caregivers' knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) towards early childhood development and responsible parenting, as well as research on the mental health of adolescents. Findings were shared with government partners, influencing intersectoral policy development with establishment of a working group for a national ECD strategy and dialogue for creation of an intersectoral roadmap on mental health for adolescents.

Recognizing the importance for efficiency of resources, the CO conducted with the Economic Research Institute a study on public investments in children and adolescents which resulted in the preparation of the first SDG baseline report on child-related SDG indicators jointly with the Ministry of Economy. With the WB colleagues, the CO developed the first in-depth Commitment to Equity for Children (CEQ4C) analysis, which motivated a partnership with the MOF colleagues, who established preliminary child budget estimates. This work will be developed further in 2020 to design budgeting tools at the local level to measure child-related budgets.

With the objective to enhance a consistent, transparent and accessible data system for child rights, the CO in partnership with Belstat developed a universal data-portal on child-related statistics (<http://www.childrenportal.belstat.gov.by/#/main>), which was registered by the Ministry of Information as an official state information resource. The CO also collaborated with Belstat on further development of the national platform for reporting

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on SDG achievements.

### **Programming At-Scale:**

Partnering with government and CSO colleagues, the CO has incorporated innovations and international good practices into existing systems to advance cross-sectoral programming in child rights.

*Shifting to Restorative Justice Practices:* Playing a convening role, UNICEF collaborated with government agencies in knowledge generation, policy support and capacity building to build a broad dialogue on restorative justice issues for minors. The CO partnered with the National Centre of Legislation and Legal Research (NCLLR) and the Belarusian Union of Lawyers in expanding a dialogue among government and the public alike on restorative justice issues for children. Under the NCLLR, an intersectoral working group comprising government agencies across the sectors – Ministry of Interior, Investigative Committee, Supreme Court, Ministry of Education, General Prosecutors – which drafted a national concept on justice for children, providing the framework for legislative development to change the justice system’s existing punitive approaches in practice and legislative processes to more restorative ones. Mediation and probation tools, proposed in the Concept, serve as core means of resocialization for minors in conflict with the law. A strong commitment in support of the Concept has been made by all key governmental agencies, with approval by the Juridical Council under the President to recommend the Concept to the Presidential Administration for official approval.

At the same time, the CO partnered with state social pedagogue centres in tandem with NGOs, where centres became a platform for using case management tools that are critical for effective work with children in conflict with the law and their parents. These tools can be applied in social rehabilitation services which can be used as alternatives to sending minors to closed-type educational institutions and providing opportunities for these minors to remain with their families and in their communities. Approximately 1000 adolescents were reached through information dissemination about the new services, of which 300 of them were referred to specialists.

In 2019, effective cooperation with NCLLR allowed high-level advocacy of the Concept and created an intersectoral platform on J4CA issues, advancing dialogue and service partnerships among state and civil society organizations. Coordination between policy and practices will continued to be fostered in 2020, with strong local leadership of city administrations to ensure sustainability of interventions and local buy-in.

*Advancing Social Inclusive Practices for Children with Disabilities:* Addressing disability issues, the CO gained synergy on results obtained over the last years to support the Government to establish comprehensive responses that address the child disability agenda across the lifespan of a child with disabilities.

During 2019, young children (0-3 years) with or at risk of disabilities gained better access to early identification and early intervention services, as a MOH decree passed a normative package regulating the ECI system. This legislative package, developed in collaboration with the CO, obliges local authorities to organize ECI centres within regional health authorities’ outpatient clinics. Key components of the decree include main principles of ECI; necessary working spaces and equipment; necessary staffing and standards for professional qualification of ECI specialists; equipment, eligibility criteria, ECI registration system, ECI standards and quality criteria, national monitoring mechanism, forms for data collection and reporting (Belstat and MoH). The ECI standards will play a bridging role in further strengthening early learning of children (3-4 years) with disabilities and developmental delays in educational settings, being applied in ECE settings to bring ECI components into mainstream pre-schools for children with more mild developmental issues.

In the transition to schooling, UNICEF contributed Estonian expertise into the MOE’s preschool and primary education curricular review regarding inclusive education practices, which will be piloted in the 2019-2020 academic year. Policy recommendations included establishment of an early complex assistance service at the preschool level, enabling children with special learning needs and developmental delays to receive additional support in their local community kindergartens where families reside rather than in separate specialized facilities. Such a structure would enable the preschool system to eventually include all children and reprofile special preschools into inclusive ones. These steps ensure continuity of inclusive approaches from ECI services to preschool and strengthen the education system’s preparation for transitioning to inclusive education.

While building a normative framework to advance environments for greater social inclusion, efforts also need to focus on shifting social norms. To address this need, the CO has initiated a multi-year national information campaign, “Just kids,” to reduce stigma by showing that children with disabilities are just like other children with dreams, desires for play and other aspects. This campaign will reach across different members in society building partnerships with public figures as well as volunteers, parents, and media members.

In 2020, the CO will accelerate its partnership with the Government on disability responses with expansion in partnership with the Government on systematic responses for inclusive education practices.

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*Strengthening Protective Environments for Families and Children:* Frequently, risks of families are only recognized when families' resources have fully depleted, becoming dangerous for children to remain with their families. In this light, the CO partnered with the MOH and MLSP to integrate approaches and services that support families. For example, the MOH's home visitation service can serve as an entry point for identifying and working with vulnerable families. To build capacities of professionals conducting home visitations, the CO established an in-service training programme to assess the family environment and detect specific risk factors, such as signs of violence or potential developmental delays, as well as gain skills on issues such as breastfeeding counselling. With the MLSP and Gomel authorities, the CO integrated case management approaches to services for families with children with disabilities, providing system responses for prevention interventions that can identify families at risk in early stages and accompany them in service support. The CO also collaborated with the UNICEF RO and Central European Initiative to establish a platform for specialists on responsible parenting practices through the international conference, "Parenting Adolescents and Educational Programmes in the Digital Age." Good practices and lessons learned shared at the conference were summarized in a resolution stipulating enhancement of the policy framework. The resolution was approved by the MoE, and a cross-sectoral strategy on responsible parenting with the life-cycle approach will be developed in collaboration with UNICEF in 2020.

Building system responses that foster families' resilience is frequently inhibited by limited intersectoral collaboration. In 2019, the CO actively advocated with the MOE, MOH and MLSP for greater intersectoral coordination at the national and local levels for child care decision-making and linked to the country's de-institutionalization process, resulting in agreement of the MOE to lead an intersectoral working group with participation of other relevant ministries. In 2020, UNICEF will continue supporting the working group to develop intersectoral, child- and family-centred responses, with advocacy for establishment of a national strategy for de-institutionalization of children across different institutions.

At the same time, the CO worked with government partners to strengthen intersectoral cooperation on cyber safety issues (especially on investigation of child pornography and online sexual exploitation cases) among law enforcement agencies, which resulted in enhancement of common approaches for qualifying these crimes. These approaches advanced steps to preserve evidence, conduct interviews with children in supportive manners, and apply effectively criminal code provisions. An intersectoral dialogue was supported through a series of seminars held in the regions, where qualified experts from central departments of the MOI and Investigative Committee informed regional colleagues on challenges in investigation of VAC online and proposed a new algorithm for investigation using contemporary digital tools.

*Empowering Adolescents as Agents of Change:* Over 2019, the CO made concerted efforts with government and CSO partners to build adolescents' capacities and platforms to participate in decisions and issues affecting their lives.

In 2019, the CO with the MOE took significant steps to enhance the child- and adolescent-friendly city (CAFC) platform, a key space for advancing adolescent participation at the local level. The CO supported capacity development of local authorities and adolescent parliaments on effective planning, monitoring and assessment of the CAFC platform; conducted an in-depth assessment on adolescent parliaments; and facilitated opportunities to learn about good international practices and share Belarusian experiences within the Global and Regional CFC Summits. To-date, 43 cities, accounting for approximately 65% of the child population, participate in the platform, and 25 of these cities have obtained the child- and adolescent-friendly status.

To unleash the potential of adolescent parliaments and regional resource centres on youth empowerment (RRCs), UPSHIFT methodology was adapted to the Belarusian context and capacity built among RRCs coordinators, specialists of additional education institutions, CSOs and UNICEF volunteers. In turn, these coordinators practiced their new skills within national forums in Mogilev and National Camp "Zubrenok" with participation of adolescents. Involvement of additional education facilities and Zubrenok camp harboured ownership among state agencies and ensured greater sustainability for the practices to continue among adolescents in the long-term.

Through adolescents' leadership training programmes, vulnerable child groups, including adolescents living with HIV, gained knowledge and skills on reproductive health, responsible sexual behaviour and resilience to risky behaviours and adherence to ARVs. Adolescent supporters on HIV prevention were widened to 120 adolescents and youth with 30 volunteers from the YFHCs in Gomel and Minsk. These adolescents' advocacy resulted in endorsement of the MOH Resolution No. 70 (July 5, 2019) to amend an existing MOH resolution, removing the requirement to indicate information of HIV infection in health certificates annually provided to kindergartens, schools, colleges, universities, and other facilities. This change strengthened confidentiality of information and overcoming barriers for children and families in chosen education establishments as well as protecting them from bullying and discrimination.

These programming interventions interlinked with partnerships and evidence generation strategies have led to CO contributing to Belarus' advancement of cross-sectoral programming targeted at system change.

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### Lessons Learned and Innovations

Over 2019, the CO accelerated its channels for engagement into programming and overall awareness raising about child rights.

*Importance of Parents and Communities as Critical Partners in Outreach and Service Design:* Across the programmes, experiences continued to underscore the importance for parents to not only be 'subjects' of services or outreach, but also active partners in design and implementation of responses.

Experiences in ECI service delivery revealed the need for effective partnerships among governmental institutions and NGOs and parents' proactive participation in the decision-making processes, where UNICEF engaged a parental organization to mobilize and support parents of premature babies. This parent organization has become another chain in the ECI referral mechanism. To enhance effectiveness of the existing ECI system, legislative provisions on cross-sectoral collaboration is required to improve access, outreach and scale-up of ECI services to all eligible children under three years old.

At the same time, research also highlighted the critical role of parents and the subsequent requirement to build their nurturing capacities. For example, the 2019 ECD KAP study highlighted adult-child interactions and parent support for ECE, where parents had more limited engagement in learning activities such as reading or looking at picture books, and musical activities such as playing music, singing or dancing. Despite limited involvement, nearly all parents reported that ECE experiences are "important for their child's development and learning," which points to the need for building awareness and capacity among parents. Likewise, the CO's 2019 research findings showed that parents (particularly fathers) play a critical role in adolescents' mental health and well-being, with parents being strong factors for adolescents' depressive and suicidal behaviours.

These lessons underscore the role that parents can have for other parents to raise understanding and positive practices. The CO is taking this lesson learned within its designing of the 2021-2025 programme cycle with the incorporation of a programme that will strengthen efforts to build parents' and caregivers' capacities for nurturing and protective care through partnerships with government and CSO channels as well as parents themselves – mothers, fathers and other caregivers – to enhance their knowledge on good parenting practices.

*Leveraging Allies in Private Sector:* Over the last few years, the CO has taken significant efforts to build on-going relationships with partners in the private sector which has opened up the child rights dialogue to community spaces not reached earlier. Partnering with businesses is only about leveraging financial resources, but also building outreach and awareness. Examples have been the national campaign with Prior Bank in more than 40 bank branches across the country on, "Family for Every Child," and the cyber safety exhibition jointly conducted with MTS. Through the cyber safety exhibition, the CO with MTS was also able to gain more than 7,000 children's practical experiences on the internet to inform better further programme responses.

At the same time, the CO has partnered with community influencers such as goodwill ambassadors, UNICEF friends and celebrities on critical child rights interventions such as the social inclusion campaign, "Just Kids." These colleagues and others accelerate UNICEF messages to broader population groups and raise attention in new contexts. The CO has also initiated an advisory board comprising business people and other high-level community figures to serve as a sounding board who can provide critical insights. Involvement of these partners have brought new perspectives to the CO's interventions and created innovative approaches that have raised overall public engagement in child-related issues.

With Belarus' hosting of the 2nd EuroGames, the CO built on the momentum to expand its work in sports partnerships. Continuing to build its partnership with existing clubs such as Dinamo Minsk Hockey and the Association of Belarusian Football Federation, the office also entered new collaborations with the Bate Borisov Football Club as well as started negotiations with National Olympic Committee. The popularity of sport in Belarus is immense and leveraging the power of brands has proven to be beneficial for promoting key messages around children's rights. In this capacity, the CO is partnering with sports organizations to also enhance outreach and reduce the threshold for accessibility of services, integrating sports for development in areas such as restorative justice.

*Advancing Public Events to Bring UNICEF Closer:* To raise visibility and outreach to the broader community, the CO has participated in large events such as the Minsk half-marathon, the EuroGame fan zones and the CO's annual Gala dinner. These events connect UNICEF messages and issues to people of different 'walks of life'. Furthermore, they set the issues in a manner where people have fun yet learn about critical child rights issues. In this capacity, people are more motivated to learn and to become involved.

The CO built on its existing volunteer group through the EuroGames. Having initially a group of approximately 30 volunteers of adolescent and youth, through the CO's collaboration with the MEGOC (the organizing agency) the number of

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volunteers grew to over 150 for the Games with participation in regions across Belarus. On this momentum, the CO continued to reach out to volunteers and has established over 200 'regular' volunteers (from 16-24 years) and more than 500 signed up for volunteering. At the same time, the volunteers are participating at different levels – being located across the country and not just in the capital. Volunteers participate in different events and have started to also become more involved in programme implementation. In 2020, the CO is taking steps to further systematize its volunteering process and involve in more regular programme processes.