

## Belarus

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### Part 1: Situation update

Belarus is an upper-middle-income country with a total population of 9.5 million people, of whom 1.9 million are children (51.4 per cent boys, 48.6 per cent girls). Belarus' economic situation began to improve in 2017; increases in domestic demand and exports resulted in GDP growth of 3.7 per cent by the third quarter of 2018. Real wages rose, outpacing productivity growth throughout the second half of 2017 and during 2018, fuelling household consumption, which grew by 7.8 per cent by the third quarter of 2018.

While improvements since the 2016 recession continued in 2018, experts estimate that current economic growth, based on cyclical factors, will not be maintained in the absence of structural changes. If current trends continue, the International Monetary Fund projects medium-term GDP growth of around 2 per cent— below what is needed to measurably raise living standards. Public debt is expected to increase considerably and stabilize at slightly below 60 per cent of GDP in the medium term. Belarus' social sector financing is at risk of further constraints, due to both significant external debt payments and budget losses triggered by Russia's replacement of oil export levies with a mineral extraction tax. The Ministry of Finance estimates that the impact of Russia's oil tax manoeuvre alone could cost Belarus as much as US\$8–US\$12 billion by 2024 – a loss comparable to spending on universal grants for children under three, amounting to 1.1 per cent of annual GDP.

Commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represents an opportunity to improve strategic resource allocations for vulnerable groups. Belarus has embraced its SDG mandate, including 50 child-related SDG indicators of 255 national indicators. In 2018 Belarus hosted the Regional SDG Coordination Leaders Forum, involving participation by the UN Deputy Secretary-General, increasing momentum and focus on the SDG response. Belarus also finalized its mainstreaming, acceleration and policy support roadmap in 2018, where the “future generation” (adolescents and youth) was defined as one of four key SDG acceleration platforms underpinning the Government's priority on addressing the needs of young people.

The national budget is likely to be the most important source of SDG financing. To mobilize resources for SDG achievement, current fiscal constraints may require re-prioritization of state expenditures, particularly in the social sectors, to enable greater fiscal efficiencies. At the same time, development of Belarus' 2035 national strategy for sustainable development provides an opportunity to estimate the financial cost of SDG's achievement.

In 2019 Belarus will host the second European Games, which could serve as a critical opportunity to adapt the sports infrastructure to the capabilities of children and adolescents with disabilities, expand the list of services, and retrain specialists to provide these services. Greater attention to social inclusion for children and adolescent with disabilities could also build a broader dialogue on expanding inclusive mainstream services. UNICEF's active sports

engagement resulted in a strong partnership with the European Games organizing committee, focused on promoting inclusive sports, child safeguarding principles and meaningful volunteer engagement.

## **Situation of children**

**Health and early child development (ECD):** Belarus' concerted efforts to maintain high levels of healthcare and immunization have resulted in important advances for young children's health and significant improvement on SDG indicators, such as infant mortality rates (3.2 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2017) and under-five mortality rates (3.9 deaths per 1,000 live births). However, a 2018 knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) survey on early child development (ECD) commissioned by UNICEF revealed significant gaps between parental knowledge and practices regarding young children's nutrition, early learning through play, violent discipline and the use of alcohol and tobacco by parents in the homes.

The Ministry of Health (MoH) structure includes a network of 37 early intervention rooms that provide intersectoral, family-oriented, medico-social services to families with children under three years who are at risk of developing a disability, or have developmental delays due to health or socially disadvantaged settings. A preliminary analysis of these rooms revealed that only about 16 per cent of children under three currently use the resource. The MoH recognized the need to expand the accessibility of these services, and passed a decree that mandates that all cities or regions with child populations of 15,000 or more establish an early intervention centre.

At the same time, two state agencies (Tonus Rehabilitation Centre and the Mother and Child Centre) collaborated with UNICEF to develop a complex assistance service and regular observation for children born with low or extremely low birth weight, who are one of the main vulnerable groups of children under three at risk of disability.

While Belarus has impressive health indicators for young children, these advances are not effectively maintained for adolescents. Some 14,816 children and adolescents were registered as having substance dependencies in 2017. Unsafe sexual behaviour often leads to increased risks of acquiring sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and unwanted pregnancy. Discrimination and stigma continue to inhibit HIV-affected children and adolescents from gaining equal access to information and services.

Adolescents also experience higher levels of mental distress, requiring more robust interventions. For the past three years, UNICEF Belarus has increased its attention to implementation of a set of prevention measures addressing suicidal behaviour among the adolescent population. Yet, worrisome statistics remain: the number of registered attempted suicides between 2015 and 2017 grew from 13.9 per 100,000 children to 16.1 per 100,000 children. The highest number of attempts (76 per cent) occurred among 15-to-17 year olds. Only 5 per cent of young people who attempted suicide and 4 per cent of young people who committed suicide were registered with a psychiatrist-narcologist prior to the incidents. These statistics underscore that early identification of adolescents' mental health status needs significant improvement.

**Disability:** Belarus's political commitment to continue reducing infant mortality rates drives efforts to increase the survival rates of children with low or extremely low birthweight, but also contributes to higher risks of children with special needs and/or disabilities. At the same time,

early identification of developmental risks in younger children also contributes to the rising rate of children with special needs (176,000 or 9.4 per cent of all children as of early 2018). These factors in turn place increased demand on the health sector to strengthen age-appropriate rehabilitation interventions and reconsider the typical medical approach by introducing family-centred services.

The 2018 national survey on disability revealed that 20 per cent of children with disabilities have intellectual disabilities, up from 17 per cent in 2017 and 10 per cent in 2011, when intellectual disabilities only accounted for one-in-ten primary disabilities. Adolescents are especially vulnerable; the proportion of adolescents aged 15–17 years with mental illnesses associated with stress was 55 per cent in 2017, vs. 40 per cent in 2014.

The disability survey showed that the majority of children and adolescents with disabilities have access to healthcare, transportation and cultural services. However, for every third respondent (32 per cent), physical exercise and sports are likely to be partially or completely inaccessible. The main barriers are non-adaptation of services to the physical capabilities of persons with disabilities, lack of information about services for people with disabilities and high prices and unwillingness of staff to assist persons with disabilities in overcoming barriers that prevent them from receiving services on par with others.

**Inclusive education:** Although Belarus achieved universal coverage of education for boys and girls during the Millennium Development Goal years, these positive national education indicators do not fully represent the actual situation for vulnerable children, such as those living in rural areas and those with special education needs or disabilities.

In 2017 some 75.9 per cent of all children aged one-to-five years attended a pre-school education programme, with a significant gap between urban and rural settings (83.3 per cent and 49.2 per cent, respectively). Belarus has achieved some progress toward promoting more inclusive practices in schools. The disability survey reported that 62 per cent of children with registered disabilities attend mainstream primary and secondary schools. Yet, closer analysis shows that those included are mainly children with mild developmental difficulties, such as mild speech disorders. One of nine (12 per cent) children with a disability does not attend any educational institution. The more complex the child's disability, the more likely that the child will not be covered by educational programmes: 35.2 per cent of children with severe disabilities do not attend educational institutions.

**Violence:** Ministry of Interior (Mol) statistics reveal increasing rates of crimes against children—family violence in particular—with an increase from 2.5 crimes per 100,000 children in 2013 to 4.8 crimes in 2017 (average of 4.9 percent from 2015–2017). In 2017 the number of child victims of crimes rose by 31.8 per cent compared to 2016.

The recent KAP study on ECD confirmed that the majority of parents of children aged 0–7 years practice violent psychological discipline, such as yelling and shaming. The survey found that 74 per cent of parents had used some form of violent discipline (physical punishment and/or psychological aggression) against their child in the past year. Parents were slightly more likely to use violent disciplinary practices with boys than with girls (75 per cent vs. 72 per cent).

The prevalence of violence against older children is also high. Just over half (50.6 per cent) of children in the 10-to-12 and 13-to-17 age groups (50.8 per cent) attending mainstream secondary schools report experiencing either physical punishment or psychological aggression

by caregivers within a one-month period. Boys are more exposed to physical violence, while girls faced more psychological violence in different environments and reported more exposure to sexual abuse.

Despite a reduction in violent discipline methods, 50.8 per cent of parents reported using violent disciplinary measures over a one-month period. But at the same time 85.7 per cent of parents stated that they practiced positive parenting, revealing a wide gap between knowledge and practice. Data showed that 56.8 per cent of the parents who reported that *their* parents regularly used physical violence against them applied physical punishment to their own children, in comparison to 17.6 per cent of parents who never had such experiences, clearly reflecting the inter-generation cycle of violence.

Peer-on-peer violence in schools, institutions and communities is widespread. Bullying by peers or older children was reported by 60.1 per cent of 5th-to-7th graders from secondary schools and 82.1 per cent of 5th-to-7th graders in residential care institutions. Children who reported exposure to sexual violence in their homes, neighbourhood or in institutions pointed to peers as the main perpetrators.

Official statistics indicate that around 95 per cent of children use the internet, mainly (70 per cent) on mobile devices. According to a UNICEF 2018 online safety survey conducted in partnership with Belarus' largest mobile operator, MTS, every third (30 per cent) child and adolescent has been insulted or humiliated on the Internet, of whom more than half (54 per cent) did not discuss it with their parents.

**Justice:** Belarus has experience positive trends in justice for children; juvenile offending declined sharply – from 9,096 crimes in 2005 to 1,716 in 2017. While alternative measures to deprivation of liberty increased (e.g., deferred punishment, conditional sentences and judgments without imposing a penalty), punitive approaches remained widespread and diversion and probation services focused on prevention of juvenile offending and rehabilitation remained largely undeveloped. Many children are still being registered through police inspections dealing with minors (8,888 children in 2017) because they have offended or are considered to be at risk of offending.

In contrast to the decreasing trend in juvenile offenses, between 2012 and 2017 crimes *against* children rose by 35.6 per cent. This trend is particularly disturbing since child victims and witnesses to crimes have limited access to child-friendly justice procedures.

During 2018 the Government expressed greater commitment to addressing issues of violence such as cyber-safety and bullying, as well as building restorative justice responses for children. In November 2018, the UN Secretary-General's Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Children conducted an official visit to Belarus, promoting greater dialogue on these issues.

**Adolescents:** In 2016 some 8.2 per cent of adolescents and youth aged 15–24 years were not employed, in school or receiving training. A recent thematic review of adolescent-related interventions estimated that approximately 19 per cent of 138,000 Belarusian adolescents aged 10–17 years could be considered vulnerable in 2017. This highlights the alarming inter-generational consequences of postponed actions to reduce vulnerabilities. For example, there are reasons to assume that the four-fold higher mortality rate for working age males than for females is associated with the almost 15,000 adolescents (75 per cent male) registered as having substance dependencies.

**Protection:** By end-2017 some 19,160 children were registered as orphaned or without parental care, of whom 3,019 (15.8 per cent) were in state-provided residential care; 2.2 per cent in children’s villages and 82 per cent in alternative family-based care (including family-type small group homes, fostering and guardianship). Fifty-three per cent of children aged 0-4 years residing in infant homes were orphaned or without parental care in 2018. The share of children in residential care has decreased substantially over time, as the share in alternative, family-based care options such as fostering and small group homes has increased.

Although progress was achieved in reducing the institutionalization of children, improvements have not benefitted all children equally. Children with disabilities and special education needs remain among the most vulnerable to institutionalization, representing 70 per cent of children in infant homes and 54 per cent of children in other residential care institutions. In addition, the 2018 ‘generations and gender’s survey found that 23 per cent of children with special education needs live in single-parent families.

By the end of 2017 as many as 26,857 children (1.4 per cent of the child population) were recognized as being “in social danger” due to family “dysfunctionality,” – a 2.8 per cent increase over 2017. Key child protection bottlenecks include: service providers’ limited capacity to detect, report and address cases of abuse and neglect; lack of family-centred services and weak intersectoral collaboration; high prevalence of alcohol addiction; and social acceptance of corporal punishment. As a result many vulnerable families are left unassisted and social protection responses begin only when families are already in deep crisis. The social protection system lacks strong family support and case-management responses to avoid the risk of children entering state care and subsequently, institutions.

**Poverty:** Progress toward reducing poverty has been reversing: while the share of low-income households with children declined from 16.1 per cent in 2005 to 7.1 per cent in 2014, it inched up to 8.7 per cent in 2017. These shifts have created greater equity gaps for children and families with children. Children make up 19.6 per cent of Belarus’ population, but they account for 36.8 per cent of the country’s poor. In 2017 a total of 210,000 children (11.3 per cent) lived below the national absolute poverty line (US\$97/month per capita in 2017). During 2018 child poverty had dipped to 10.3 per cent by the third quarter. Despite this improvement, the risk of poverty remains higher for children with two or more siblings, children with disabilities and children in single-parent households. Furthermore, it appears that older children and adolescents are more severely affected by poverty. Poverty is often associated with reduced levels of care and lack of parental control which, in turn, can trigger vulnerabilities related to adolescent health and behaviour.

## Part 2: Major results including in humanitarian action and gender, against the results in the country programme document

UNICEF Belarus upholds the priority principles of the 2030 Agenda, with a focus on equity and a commitment to leave no child behind. The programme focuses on the most vulnerable children and young people – with particular attention to the cross-cutting issues of disability, violence and the vulnerabilities facing adolescents and young people. These themes coincide with key strategies present in the SDGs, calling for work to close equity gaps among groups of children and young people and establish protective and inclusive environments. UNICEF’s work with its main partners is aligned with key government strategies, state programmes and

actions plans.

UNICEF Belarus's country programme concentrates on four components: 1) building families' resilience, to strengthen protective environments for children (especially young children); 2) enhancing access to quality, inclusive services for children with special education needs and disabilities; (3) improving social policies and systems to reduce risks to adolescents' health and development and empower their meaningful participation; and (4) strengthening monitoring, knowledge generation and alliance-building for child rights. These programme interventions directly contribute to UNICEF's five Strategic Plan goals.

### **Goal area 1: Every child survives and thrives**

Working with the Government and civil society organizations (CSOs), UNICEF Belarus adopted a lifecycle approach to strengthening system responses for holistic, multi-sectoral medico-social services that are age-appropriate and accessible. UNICEF Belarus applied UNICEF's global "programming for at-scale results" strategy, partnering to strengthen national systems and build community engagement.

**Early childhood interventions (ECI):** Global evidence underscores that universal access to high quality ECI services can change a child's developmental trajectory, mitigate the severity of disability and improve learning and behavioural outcomes. ECI services have been evolving in Belarus for more than 15 years; interventions contributed to the 40 per cent decrease in children with disabilities in institutions and increased access by 88 per cent of children with disabilities to education and educational programmes.

In 2018 UNICEF Belarus continued to partner with government colleagues, practitioners and parents to systematize existing ECI services to a national system of multi-district ECI centres, now regulated under a MoH decree (November 2018). UNICEF provided technical support for developing and advocating in favour of this decree, creating the normative framework for establishing staffing levels and service standards sufficient to enhance ECI outreach. Specifically, the decree ensures that all provinces and large districts will provide ECI services to families with children under three years of age who are at risk of developing a disability or have developmental delays due to health or socially disadvantaged settings.

Monitoring of 37 ECI spaces in existence since 2013 revealed that only 16 per cent of children under three years who need these services have ready access. Based on this monitoring, large towns (with child populations of c.15,000) were identified to serve as hosts to 28 multidistrict ECI centres. To address capacity needs, an in-service training programme for paediatricians and child neurologists was developed with the Belarus Medical Academy of Postgraduate Education and tested by 56 specialists from each of the 28 participating ECI facilities. At the same time, an ECI resource centre was organized in each region to ensure sustainable and on-going methodological support and training for all ECI specialists. These centres will become fully functional during the first quarter of 2019.

UNICEF also supplied this network of centres with modern rehabilitation, play and didactical materials and developed a short manual to support the specialists in use of these resources. New screening tools were also piloted with ECI specialists and provided to the network of centres; the MoH then recommended further distribution of these tools to all ECI centres. Integration of the tools will enhance professionals' capacity to identify children's developmental difficulties and ensure consistent screening by facilities across the country. Screening will be

carried out by multidisciplinary teams to ensure maximum opportunities for identification of a child's strengths and further needs in different domains of development, upon which ECI support will be built.

Capacity building and system strengthening will continue during the remaining two years of UNICEF Belarus' country programme. It is expected that the result by end-2020 will be a sustainable national ECI system with estimated coverage of at least 90 per cent of children under three who need such services and their parents. This estimate is based on the eligibility criteria for ECI services, which is stipulated in the ECI decree and includes both medical and social factors that may, or already do, influence the child's development. UNICEF Belarus will also develop a comprehensive monitoring programme for data collection on quality and continuation of use of ECI services.

**Youth-friendly health centres (YFHC):** Belarus has a network of 48 YFHCs throughout the country, focusing on advancing adolescent health and healthy lifestyles. In partnership with the MoH and other UN agencies, UNICEF Belarus support has helped YFHCs to become strategic services for addressing the unique needs of adolescents and young people. Youth-friendly health services provide confidential, accessible and age-targeted counselling to adolescents and young people on critical health and social issues, including reproductive and mental health and promotion of healthy lifestyles. Adolescents are active partners in creating solutions and responses through peer-to-peer outreach.

Similar to its work on ECI, in 2018 UNICEF Belarus coordinated capacity development and policy initiatives to strengthen adolescent health services. Findings from a 2017 certification process of all YFHCs within the country highlighted the need for greater attention to outreach to vulnerable and marginalized groups. In 2018 training workshops were developed to build healthcare professionals' skills in effective communication, service provision and counselling vulnerable and marginalized adolescents.

Working with MoH leadership UNICEF developed a national strategy on child and adolescent health during 2017 and 2018. The draft strategy, after approval by the MoH interagency coordination council will serve as a guide for development of 2021–2025 state programmes related to child and adolescent health.

At end-2018 UNICEF Belarus convened key stakeholders (Government and NGO partners and adolescents) at a national roundtable to examine the results of YFHCs' certification and review the draft strategy. The roundtable resolution underscored the critical need for key actions related to: outreach to marginalized adolescents, improving service quality and developing an interagency action plan for improving adolescent health.

**HIV:** Working with CSOs and adolescents, UNICEF applied a community engagement strategy from "programming for at-scale results", building the capacity of HIV-affected adolescents to explain to decision-makers their need for supportive and non-discriminatory environments.

Building leadership and communication skills, 22 adolescents (aged 10–16) living with HIV (10 girls, 12 boys) successfully advocated with the MOH for amendments to Decree #92, which regulates a list of diseases and denies HIV-affected children access to summer camps. Specifically, the adolescents informed the deputy minister of health that MoH Decree #92 provisions negatively affect their right to recreation activities, noting that HIV-affected children and adolescents are excluded from summer camps because the decree lists HIV as an

infectious disease that prevents participation. The deputy minister acknowledged these barriers, and an amendment to Decree #92 lifting the restrictions was drafted and proposed by the MoH for approval in 2019.

The group of adolescents also met with representatives from the Ministry of Sports and Tourism during a joint collegium meeting where they presented concerns about the restrictions placed on sport activities available for participation by HIV-affected children. The adolescents also plan to advocate with Ministry of Education (MoE) officials to address concerns regarding stigma in pre-schools and schools, where teachers have broken confidentiality issues by disclosing children's HIV status.

These advocacy initiatives were possible due to the capacity development of girls and boys, gaining leadership skills and knowledge about healthy lifestyles and effective communication. Through different forums these young people explored with youth leadership coaches and peers from Ukraine about issues such as HIV status disclosure and how to manage conflict resolution and overcome stressful situations. The adolescents also established a social network group where they identified issues regarding their HIV-status that affect their daily lives.

These actions represent budding steps toward meaningful adolescent participation and advocacy coalitions in which young people raise their voice and practice the principle 'nothing about us, without us'.

## **Goal area 2: Every child learns**

The Government has recognized that access to mainstream schools for children with disabilities is limited, partnering with UNICEF to establish a national concept for inclusive education (IE) and introduce experimental platforms to test inclusive models. UNICEF has a close working relationship with the MoE, providing strategic interventions and expertise that, through partnership, can synergize existing resources in the country and actively advance the inclusion agenda.

In line with SDG 4 on education and the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD), Belarus' MoE recognized the need for IE and has committed to advancing IE through its national IE concept, as well as Belarus's national strategy for sustainable development by 2035.

Over the last four years the MoE piloted inclusive practices in eight secondary schools, and in the beginning of 2018 made plans to assess the lessons learned from these practices and expand piloting in secondary schools during the 2018–2019 academic year. The Ministry, together with UNICEF and the Belarus State Pedagogical University (BSPU), established an in-service teacher training programme on IE that as of end-2018 had increased the knowledge of more than 7,000 education professionals. At the same time, UNICEF supported the establishment of a resource centre on inclusive education within the BSPU, providing face-to-face training outreach and online mentoring.

In 2018 UNICEF played a catalytic role, partnering with the MoE to strengthen its system response to integrating inclusive approaches into mainstream schools. Specifically, UNICEF developed a plan with the Ministry to expand the four-year piloting process to include pre-schools and primary schools (incorporating Estonian expertise), as well as establishing

partnerships with MoE regional (*oblast*) IE resource centres to provide ongoing methodological support and supervision to schools on transitioning to inclusive classrooms.

The resource centres were created within the existing network of correctional developmental centres at the regional level, and currently provide methodological support for diagnostics and the development of individual learning/rehabilitation plans to similar centres at the district level. In turn, district centres work with children with disabilities of varying degrees who currently are not able to be integrated into mainstream school settings without support to mainstream teachers. By creating a new role for these regional centres, UNICEF facilitated with the MoE and regional centre directors the drafting of a resolution to establish IE resource centres, as well as strategy workshops, to develop standard operating procedures that can help to facilitate the transfer of knowledge currently available at these centres to education professionals in mainstream schools. Thus the regional centres become a bridge, providing ongoing methodological support for schools' transition to inclusion. UNICEF Belarus initiated the normative provisions for establishment of IE resource centres and provided methodological and diagnostic resources to facilitate their new role.

During 2018 UNICEF also facilitated the integration of validated diagnostic tools into psycho-medical-paedagogical committees, enhancing the capacity of specialists to identify special educational conditions, based on the child's abilities and educational needs. UNICEF also leveraged international expertise into the MoE preschool curriculum review, which will be piloted for one year and come into force in September 2019. One major recommendation was the establishment of an early complex assistance service in preschools, enabling children with learning difficulties and developmental delays to receive additional support at their local community kindergarten rather than in separate specialized facilities. Such a structure would enable the preschool system to eventually include all children and re-profile special preschools into inclusive ones.

These steps strengthened the education system's preparation for transitioning to IE and supported the MoE to review existing models of integrated education, with a clear vision for the four-year piloting process. UNICEF Belarus will play a convening role at a 2019 high-level policy meeting, reaffirming the MoE's commitment to inclusive education.

### **Goal area 3: Every child is protected from violence and exploitation**

For UNICEF Belarus, protection involves both prevention of abuse and neglect and access to justice and restorative practices. Over 2018 UNICEF Belarus enhanced its protection initiatives through policy engagement and by harnessing the power of evidence as a driver of change.

**Preventing violence against children:** In 2018 UNICEF completed a survey assessment involving over 5,000 children aged 10-to-17 and more than 2,000 parents and service providers. The assessment was developed in collaboration with four ministries (education, health, labour and social protection, and interior), promoting "buy-in" to the process and its outcomes. The research revealed limited awareness among children and parents about existing types of violence against children. Even among those knowledgeable about non-violent practices, their actions did not reflect this understanding. In addition, the assessment highlighted peer bullying as a significant and growing phenomenon, with peers and older children as the main perpetrators of violence against children in schools, institutions and communities.

Combining the UNICEF strategies of advocacy through evidence generation and promotion of horizontal collaboration, UNICEF Belarus initiated plans for integrating the safe and enabling environments in schools (SEES) model. SEES applies a 'whole community' approach where all stakeholders collaborate to address violence among peers (bullying) in school settings, which was developed by UNICEF-Croatia and tested over an eight-year period.

In spring 2018 Croatian experts came to Belarus on a technical mission to consult with the MoE and relevant education professionals to explore opportunities for adapting the SEES model for Belarus. After presenting the results of the violence survey to Government and NGO colleagues, SEES experiences from Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro were shared and publicly discussed. The manual for the SEES programme has been adapted, through consultations with teachers, CSOs and young people. In collaboration with the MoE, the programme will be piloted in selected schools in 2019 and during the 2019-2020 academic year.

While taking initial steps to work with schools on establishing safe and enabling environments, UNICEF also built partnerships with MoI and Investigative Committee to enhance cyber-safety and protection of children from sexual violence on the Internet. To develop interagency cooperation, UNICEF facilitated dialogue between police and investigators during a workshop on strategies to prevent pornography and sexual exploitation of children on the Internet. At the same time, UNICEF Belarus promoted the incorporation of informational technologies into the national system for identifying web-based child pornography and sexual violence against children through use of Child Protection System software, considered to be one of the world's most innovative technologies for addressing online child pornography. The roadmap for putting this technology into practice will be developed next year.

In November 2018 UNICEF contributed to the nationwide debate over violence against children by facilitating the visit of Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Violence against Children, and arranging her meetings with the representatives of the Government agencies and CSOs. Building on the public dialogue regarding cyber safety, UNICEF collaborated with the Investigative Committee to hold a high-level forum with the Special Representative's participation, entitled 'prevention of violence against children on the internet: best world practices,' which informed public discussion on the issue and added new momentum for planning next steps to counteract cyber violence.

**Justice for children:** While the number of crimes by minors has decreased in recent years, the justice response for children remains punitive and offers only limited alternative rehabilitative options.

UNICEF Belarus targeted its efforts in 2018 to creating buy-in from the Government and opening up an opportunity for high-level dialogue to develop a national policy on restorative justice approaches for children. A strategic partnership with the National Centre for Law and Legal Research (NCLLR) resulted in support for dialogue via the high-level international forum on restorative justice, enabling government partners to express their commitment and review international good practices. Laying the foundation for further examination of restorative justice practices, UNICEF Belarus fostered other learning opportunities through study tours to Sweden on restorative service practices and to Georgia to learn about the country's overall reform of the justice system for children. A workshop was also held with the Supreme Court on drug-related crimes involving minors. These interventions led to the establishment of an interagency working group under the leadership of the NCLLR, comprised of representatives from the Supreme Court; Prosecutor's General Office; Investigative Committee; ministries of

interior, justice, education and health; and civil society. This working group is tasked with reviewing national legislation related to justice issues for children in conflict with the law and to draft a framework for potential legislative changes that could better advance restorative justice responses for children.

Serving as convener, UNICEF continued to collaborate with government agencies in knowledge generation, policy support and capacity building, while involving CSOs such as Mediation and Law and 'World Without Borders in implementation of UNICEF projects on access to justice, thus securing government/non-governmental partnerships. Together with state agencies, these partners are working to establish restorative social services at the community level, providing children in conflict with the law with rehabilitation and re-socialization opportunities.

At the same time, to ensure child-friendly approaches to children in conflict and contact with the law, UNICEF Belarus leveraged resources to strengthen the capacity of investigators, prosecutors, advocates and judges through curricular development on Justice for Children (J4C), which was piloted and integrated into training programmes of the Institute for Retraining and Qualification Upgrading of Judges, Prosecutors and Legal Professionals at the Belarusian State University. Through this pilot 98 legal professionals gained new skills on J4C issues, ensuring the specialization of key justice professionals dealing with young offenders.

#### **Goal area 4: Every child lives in a safe and clean environment**

Globally, a growing proportion of children and families are living in cities and urban settings. In Belarus, 80 per cent of the population is located in cities, which makes indicators on urban safety under Goal 4 of UNICEF's Strategic Plan particularly relevant. In this context, UNICEF Belarus's child- and adolescent-friendly city platform can serve as an effective channel for advancing child-focused actions on planning, budgeting and service development. At the same time, the platform also includes Goal 5, by promoting adolescent participation.

**Child- and adolescent-friendly cities:** UNICEF Belarus has worked more than 10 years with local governments, the MoE, CSOs and communities to place children's and adolescents' interests high on the political agenda through the child-friendly city initiative (CFCI). The initiative has taken three main directions: increasing child-sensitive local governance (e.g., planning, budgeting), encouraging a minimum package of specific services for children and adolescents and advancing children's and adolescent's participation in local decision-making. By 2018 there were 25 cities involved in the initiative, and 22 had earned the title 'child-friendly' and were home to more than 50 per cent of the country's child population.

Applying UNICEF's strategy for public engagement to win support for the cause of children, UNICEF Belarus capitalized on the country's strong commitment to the SDG agenda by transforming the child-friendly city initiative into the child- and adolescent-friendly city (CAFC) platform. The platform provided UNICEF with a forum for direct dialogue with local authorities, CSOs and families on child rights issues and strategies to make their communities friendlier for children and adolescents. During 2018 this transformation enabled UNICEF to build dialogue with cities with the aim of heightening attention on adolescents and the 'second decade,' recognizing that current responses do not sufficiently impact adolescents. Within Belarus' SDG roadmap adolescents and young people ('future generation') were defined as an 'accelerator' to achieve the SDG agenda, which is in harmony with UNICEF's global 'generations unlimited' platform.

The CAFC platform requires participating cities to review their city's friendliness based on parameters focused on urban safety issues, such as living environment and child safety in the environment. These assessments are carried out through a participatory process and used as the baseline for establishing an action plan to enhance the city's responses. In this manner, the CFCI serves as a platform for addressing and implementing national priorities (such as the SDGs) in local jurisdictions.

Working with the Ministry of Economy's Institute, participating city administrators and CSOs, SDG-related indicators were integrated into the CAFC monitoring index. Another example of localization of national priorities was the way in which inclusion was addressed by CFCIs following Belarus' ratification of the CRPD in 2016. In August 2018 a national CAFC conference was held in Mogilev, where all 25 cities participated and representatives agreed on integrating newly developed SDG indicators into the CAFC index.

UNICEF Belarus is also expanding its work with cities in regard to safe environments, advocating for greater attention to local administrations' planning and budgeting for services from a more child-friendly perspective.

### **Goal area 5: Every child has an equitable chance in life**

In the spirit of the SDG call to leave no one behind, UNICEF's Strategic Plan Goal 5 focuses on empowering children and adolescents to fulfil their potential. For UNICEF Belarus, this meant working to both reduce vulnerabilities and enhance voice and participation of children and adolescents.

**De-institutionalization of children:** Use of residential care for childcare and as a form of rehabilitation service is a widely used practice in the Eastern European/CIS region. International research has proven that long-term residential care can have detrimental effects on children's development and well-being, stressing the need for focus on family support and alternative family-based care over institutions.

In Belarus the Government has recognized the need for de-institutionalization of children and made significant progress over the last five years. Institutional care is managed by three ministries, for different age groups and children with varying capacities. While the number of institutions over the last 10 years has been almost halved, children with special education needs and disabilities have not benefited equally; they represent almost half of the total number of children living in institutions. Thus UNICEF took steps in 2018 to accelerate the de-institutionalization process, particularly for children with disabilities.

To build a stronger dialogue, UNICEF and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MLSP) reviewed the 10 institutions under the Ministry's responsibility, which care for children with the most complex disabilities. The review's design was developed in collaboration with MLSP colleagues and followed international standards (UN Guidelines for Alternative Child Care). Recommendations were discussed with MLSP colleagues. The Minister committed to share the report findings with the other two responsible ministries (MoH and MoE), as well as directors of MLSP departments and the 10 institutions, to serve as a framework for developing a broader dialogue on de-institutionalization. The Ministry recognizes the critical importance for developing an inter-ministerial review and action plan for de-institutionalization.

In September, UNICEF Belarus, the UNICEF Regional Office and UNICEF Moldova organized a three-day knowledge exchange visit to review Moldova's de-institutionalization experiences with high-level colleagues from the ministries of health, education, labour and social protection, and finance. This visit provided a critical opportunity for colleagues to exchange experiences, and some Moldavian practices were identified as adaptable for Belarus', to serve as potential first steps for accelerating de-institutionalization, with a particular focus on disability.

**Adolescent and youth participation:** In 2018 UNICEF Belarus took significant steps toward enhancing its focus on youth participation and attention to strategies for including adolescents from various backgrounds. The creation of child- and adolescent-led parliaments, initiated by the 25 participating child- and adolescent-friendly cities (and three other cities), boosted child participation in local community agendas. Adolescents and young people gained analytical skills, through activities such as monitoring the city's status on child rights through questionnaires and data collected from the CFC index.

To build adolescents' capacity to be proactive in their communities, UNICEF supported almost 700 adolescents and youth to learn about project design approaches, monitoring processes to define community problems and steps for creating solutions. With these skills the adolescents identified potential bottlenecks between project plans and real outcomes and evaluated the effectiveness of the final product. At the same time UNICEF, with support from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, established seven regional youth resource centres to provide a separate meeting space for adolescents, specifically youth parliament members. These centres provide a venue for training sessions and information exchange.

UNICEF also enhanced active involvement by adolescents in the design of its programmes, consulting with them during development of the country office 'safe and enabling environments in schools' activities and collaborating with them in the creation of youth resource centres.

### **Cross-cutting responses**

In addition to programme responses to the four goals of UNICEF's Strategic Plan, UNICEF Belarus has cross-cutting outputs that contribute to the advocacy and engagement strategies intertwined throughout the programmes.

**Child rights monitoring:** 'Harnessing the power of evidence as a driver of change' is a key strategy used by UNICEF Belarus and government partners to support the Government with strategic analysis and advice on gaps for planning and policy purposes. Under the child rights monitoring (CRM) output, UNICEF Belarus supported government partners to generate data on key child rights issues during 2018, working with Belstat (Belarusian National Statistics Committee) to complete a survey of 12,600 households to assess the situation of people with disabilities (applying the UNICEF/Washington Group data module on child functioning). The survey results, launched at a joint press-conference with Belstat and line ministries, provide necessary evidence for advocacy on key issues such as inclusive education practices, and can inform the drafting of the country's first periodic report to the country committee on the CRPD. Likewise, UNICEF and the MoE completed a thematic evaluation of adolescents' responses, examining both government interventions and UNICEF-specific initiatives. The findings are informing the Government process for drafting a chapter on children and adolescents in the new national strategy for sustainable development through 2035. In addition, preparation for the sixth-round multi-indicator cluster survey was completed in 2018. This survey of 9,000 households, implemented in partnership with the World Bank, will provide the Government with

primary data on key child rights issues and establish a baseline for important SDG indicators.

As a member of the high-level SDG coordination leaders forum UNICEF Belarus organized a panel dedicated to SDG monitoring, with a pre-launch of UNICEF's global report "Progress for Every Child in the SDG Era. In November BelStat also participated in the first meeting of the global inter-agency experts group on SDG indicator 16.2, aimed at strengthening data on violence against children. To improve data availability for monitoring purposes, together with BelStat UNICEF supported the development of a national reporting platform for achieving the SDGs and a prototype for a universal data portal on child-related statistics.

To inform UNICEF programming and facilitate evidence-based advocacy with key stakeholders, the CRM programme developed analytical briefs and factsheets on a regular basis. UNICEF Belarus ensured the pursuit of ethical standards and quality assurance of data collection and analysis in the above-mentioned surveys as well as the thematic study on violence against children, the KAP on ECD and parenting and research on public investment in children and adolescents. The latter, applying the CEQ4C approach and conducted in collaboration with UNICEF's Office of Research and the World Bank, has provided promising initial findings relevant for high-level advocacy and informing programme development for the current and next country programme cycle.

**Building alliances for children:** UNICEF Belarus' alliance building agenda had three strategic objectives: (1) raising awareness on child rights issues and increasing UNICEF visibility to strengthen its advocacy positions, (2) leveraging resources for children and (3) enhancing engagement for children. These objectives are interlinked and integrated throughout the other programme interventions.

**Enhancing communication for advocacy:** During 2018 the office focused on moving from digital first to mobile first by establishing a partnership with VIBER (a global messaging app), to launch a new social media channel for UNICEF outreach in Belarus. Stable growth of followers via traditional social media (most notably Facebook and Instagram) and introduction of the Viber public chat meant that the total number of supporters exposed to UNICEF visibility and messages regularly reached over 80,000, mostly aged 25-35. These innovations resulted in increased engagement; the number of comments and messages on child rights rose by approximately 35 per cent.

At the same time, to continue engaging print, online and broadcast media beyond press releases and one-time comments, UNICEF Belarus initiated media capacity development workshops, in partnership with the Belarus Press Club. This work will continue in 2019 through two upcoming communication campaigns: one on increasing the uptake of healthy lifestyles among adolescents and the other on shifting public opinion on children with disabilities and their families.

While working to expand its overall public outreach, UNICEF Belarus also sought to increase its presence and visibility in the country's regions. Outreach was targeted through the child- and adolescent-friendly cities platform, with a focus on the SDGs. Through these efforts, UNICEF was able to both localize understanding about the SDGs and connect the equity agenda to the global and national SDG initiative. These connections raise public awareness about UNICEF and its activities, enhancing overall attention to child rights.

**Leveraging resources for children-public donors:** UNICEF Belarus worked to strengthen

existing and establish new partnerships with public bilateral and multilateral donors to advance the realization of children's rights and promote the change agenda. UNICEF's partnership-building activities contributed to shaping a national child rights agenda and promoting SDG Goal 17 (partnership for sustainable development). UNICEF used its mandate to align the priorities of international stakeholders with the national development agenda, to coordinate the actions of all parties involved to secure progress for children. Successful partnerships with international donors included a project on access to justice supported by the UK, a project on inclusive education with Estonia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and projects on youth participation, enhancing online safety for children and creating safe and enabling environment in schools, supported by Polish Aid. These partnerships involved both financial resources and exchanges of technical expertise, thus building stronger professional networks for Belarusian officials to share lessons learned.

**Leveraging resources for children -private sector:** To ensure long-term sustainability of its programme results, UNICEF Belarus continued to cultivate relationships with the private sector, while building on existing partnerships and forging new ones. The partnership initiated with Prior Bank in fall 2017('a family for every child') leveraged funds through individual ATM and electronic banking donations. During the year under review 40 branches of Prior Bank joined the campaign, creating visibility in over ATMs about the importance of families and social inclusion and attracting around 8,000 repeat and one-time donors. The partnership has directly benefitted children with disabilities and opened doors for UNICEF to use the network of Prior Bank offices and ATMs across the country for advocacy and brand building.

Greater awareness about UNICEF's mandate within the private sector brought proactive interest from new partners. The traditional Gala dinner attracted such regional celebrities as a conductor and classic piano player, rock star, and a top model. In relation to information technology, a developer of family-friendly online games, joined UNICEF for an online fund-raising event that reached audiences all over the world

These initiatives not only increased financial resources for child rights, but also established channels for outreach to different groups in Belarusian society. Through these activities, UNICEF served as a convener for broader engagement on child rights. Using UNICEF's corporate social responsibility modality, the office was also able to leverage non-monetary resources. The partnership with MTS, a major national mobile operator, helped support ongoing on-line safety promotion activities through an interactive exhibition (children on the Internet) jointly produced by UNICEF and MTS and attended by thousands of school children in Minsk. Likewise, UNICEF tapped the expertise of the top IT company (EPAM) to integrate human-centred design principles into youth resource centres as part of the CAFC platform.

**Engaging for children –S4D agenda and volunteer engagement:** UNICEF's partnerships with sports organizations, such as Dinamo Minsk Hockey team and the Football Federation continued. The joint 'Family Football' initiative featured messages on better parenting and won the regional UEFA best practice prize for grassroots football. These partnerships engaged families, sports fans and players alike to consider responsible parenting and built broader messages on these issues among the general public. With the Football Federation, the children's football festival, (Papa, Mama and Me – Football Family) involved over 100 families from across the country. These activities provided individuals with a chance to personally 'invest' in these child rights issues. Such emotional investment can motivate individuals to become more conscious of related issues in their communities and daily lives.

UNICEF Belarus actively engaged volunteers; some 30 youth volunteers (high school seniors and university students) became indispensable resources for support at events and advocacy activities, both in Minsk and the regions. These young people gained knowledge about child rights and organizational and communication skills, becoming 'ambassadors' on child rights and UNICEF among their peers and communities. UNICEF Belarus plans to expand and strengthen its work with volunteers, developing a more structured system for working with them, whereby longer-time volunteers coach newcomers and more experienced volunteers manage small groups of juniors. At the same time, UNICEF will tap into its new partnership with the Foundation of the Second EuroGames Directive and partnership in the 2019 Second EuroGames to establish a broader volunteer network that gains understanding about child rights and a channel for volunteerism during the Games and afterwards, in the long term.

### Part 3: Lessons learned and constraints

UNICEF Belarus learned several lessons from its 2018 programming, as well as insights to the use of change strategies and partnerships, that will guide strategic planning in 2019 and beyond, particularly the design of the 2021-2025 country programme.

**Shifting to a child- and adolescent-friendly city platform**, with an emphasis on the SDGs, created an opportunity to harmonize local programmes with the global SDG agenda, as well as better align UNICEF Belarus' programming with national priorities.

A critical process in promoting child rights and policy development is managing the delicate balance between the national and local levels – with the national level setting policy frameworks and guidance, but the local levels implementing service responses and being where families and children live.

In 2018 UNICEF Belarus made a concerted effort to enhance the former child-friendly city initiative to a broader platform that placed special focus on both adolescent's unique needs and the SDG agenda. This platform allowed for increased visibility and advocacy at the regional level and bringing national priorities to the local level, in particular the SDG agenda and adolescent focus. The integration of SDG-related indicators into the CAFC index, used by cities to assess their level of child-friendliness, provided the impetus to focus local administrations on these priorities.

This strategy proved to be effective as Belarus has a strong commitment to the SDG agenda, making UNICEF's focus strongly in line with national priorities; at the same time the SDG agenda lends itself to UNICEF's equity agenda. As Belarus has identified the future generation as an accelerator for its SDG achievements, enhanced attention to adolescents also better aligns UNICEF's programming with national priorities.

In 2019 UNICEF will continue to strengthen this platform with an increased focus on advancing more participatory governance on planning and budgeting with local administrations and adolescents. At the same time UNICEF Belarus will build on local-level SDG dialogue.

**Broadening cross-sectoral partnerships** served as a key impetus in securing sustainable results. Despite their importance, forging these partnerships proved to be challenging. While stakeholders from all sectors of the society (Government, business and civil society) showed sufficient motivation to work on the child rights issues related to their core agendas, they were

less motivated to find common ground and cooperate with other sectors. UNICEF worked to overcome rifts by rallying stakeholders across sectors to work on issues of nationwide concern. For example, bringing together representatives of law enforcement agencies, CSOs and the leading mobile operator to address various aspects of online safety for children, and thereby transforming scattered activities into a concerted effort for the benefit of children.

Ultimately, broadening partnerships with the private sector and with individuals underscored the overall value of the relationships, since opportunities for engagement are as critical as resources. UNICEF Belarus expanded its capacity to develop messages and initiatives that resonate with a larger portion of the population by using private companies' communications and marketing channels to reach out to wide circles of their customers and other community members. As changing attitudes and behaviours is a critical component of advancing child rights, fostering engagement from different spheres of communities proved to be a strategic intervention.

**Greater gender focus on adolescent outreach** responses is required to ensure effective support for boys and girls: The UNICEF Belarus review of gender breakdown of its adolescent and youth programming reflected that girls are more involved (70 per cent) than boys (30 per cent). Specifically, adolescent girls had significantly more participation in capacity-building sessions (75 per cent), such as for leadership development and communication skills. Participation in adolescent-led parliaments and engagement in YFHS also involved more girls than boys. In regard to HIV testing and participation in training sessions for adolescents living with HIV, the involvement between boys (55 per cent) and girls (45 per cent) was more balanced.

In assessing this situation UNICEF Belarus is convinced that the need for such information and interventions is equally important for male and female adolescents. Hence the country office plans to fine-tune its outreach strategies to be more gender sensitive. One solution could be to incorporate S4D components into existing interventions such as YFHS, information outreach and capacity building to attract more boys.

**Change strategies:** In a middle-income country UNICEF's interventions have focused on system change and coordinated partnerships with key stakeholders. UNICEF Belarus has applied many of the eight 2018-2021 Strategic Plan change strategies, finding that several play a major role in advancing UNICEF's agenda in Belarus. A significant number of interventions focus on programming for at-scale results, frequently complemented by the strategy of harnessing the power of evidence as a driver of change. As Belarus has high capacity and a structured, social-oriented system, UNICEF's value-added lies in providing strategies that advance innovations and international child rights standards that the country can consider for adaptation to the Belarus context. These strategies have served as tools enabling UNICEF to enter into close partnership with the Government and CSO partners and invest in system strategies and programme adjustments that can be integrated into national systems.

UNICEF Belarus's expanding partnership agenda also opened up opportunities to build on strategies such as 'winning support for the cause of children,' 'developing and leveraging resources and partnerships' and harnessing the power of business and markets'. These strategies enabled UNICEF Belarus to serve as a convener for expanding dialogues with members of different sectors of society and strengthening their engagement in child rights issues.

In 2019 UNICEF Belarus will solidify the lessons learned and raise its work to a new level. The growing private sector partnerships represent a tested process for establishing greater engagement – both through leveraging resources and participation by different social actors. Greater efforts will be applied to fostering private partnerships, both to leverage resources and provide a channel for community engagement and activism to protect children’s rights.

At the same UNICEF Belarus will build on its S4D momentum, participating as a key partner in the Second European Games as well as integrating S4D strategies into overall programming strategies, as well as establishing a more long-term legacy for sustainable volunteerism among adolescents and young people.

With 2019 as the initial year for planning the new programme cycle (2021-2025), UNICEF Belarus will work to prioritize and systematize responses with particular attention to critical opportunities such as justice for children, attention to the second decade and support to children with disabilities. UNICEF Belarus plans to develop a planning process that will invite adolescents’ involvement and feedback on the programme design, as well as active participation by the Government and CSOs.

END/