

Update on the context and situation of children

Bulgaria, an upper-middle-income country and a member state of the European Union (EU) since 2007 has a population of 7 Million people (2018) with 17 percent (1.2 million) of them being children. Bulgaria currently ranks among the countries with the most rapidly shrinking population with a negative population growth rate of minus 0.70 (World Bank data, 2018). The main ethnic groups are: Bulgarians 84.8 percent, Turks 8.8 Percent and Roma 4.9 percent (Census, 2011). Bulgaria's Human Development Index (HDI) for 2018 is in the very high category at 0.816 positioning it at 52 out of 189 countries and territories. The gender development index is 0.993 and gender inequality index of 0.218, placing Bulgaria in the group of countries with high equality in HDI achievements between women and men. However, the Human capital index (HCI) which measures which countries are best in mobilizing the economic and professional potential of its citizens, Bulgaria with a value of 0.68 ranks 44 out of 159 countries (2018). For Bulgaria, the index shows that a child born today can expect to achieve 68 percent of his or her potential as an adult.

Since May 2017, the Government is led by the center-right "Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria" CEDB in coalition with the "United Patriots". In 2019, there were two elections – for the European Parliament in May 2019, and for local governments in October 2019. These did not bring significant changes in the political landscape. The ruling CEDB won both elections receiving 31% of the votes for the European Parliament compared to 24% for the main opposition party - Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and achieved a decisive victory at the local elections by winning in 140 out of the 265 municipalities, including in 17 out of the 28 district centers. Despite the good elections results for CEDB, the tensions within the ruling coalition and among the members of the "United Patriots" alliance continued to grow, which could lead to early elections in 2020.

The year was marked by growing online attacks on human rights and child rights, fake news and manipulations coming from small but well-organized and vocal nationalistic and religious groups, which also organized street protests in the big cities. Due to the negative social media reactions, the Government put on hold the draft National Strategy for the Child (2019-2030) and postponed the entry into force of the newly adopted Social Services Act. The protests and tensions around the reform in the social services provision, introduced with the new Act, lead to the resignation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy in December 2019.

Throughout the year, the macro-economic framework remained stable with real GDP growth estimated at 3.8% (compared to 1.9% EU average) and forecasted at 2.8% in 2020. For a third consecutive year, the consolidated government budget posted a surplus of BGN 1.26 million (US\$0.72bn). In 2019, the Government increased the funds allocated for social protection and for education with BGN 197 million (USD 112,5 million) and BGN 425 million (USD 243 million), respectively. However, the shares of GDP allocated to health (4.5%), education (3.6%) and social protection (12%) remained at the same level and below the EU averages. The unemployment rate remained low at 4.2% in October 2019 (compared to 6.3% EU average) with youth unemployment rate twice higher (9.1% in October 2019) and the young, the low-skilled, the Roma and the rural population continued to face difficulties in entering employment.

Despite the macro-economic stability, the high level of poverty and income inequality remained a serious challenge. According to the EU SILC study "Social Inclusion and Living Conditions", the share of the population-at-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion was 32.8 % in 2018 and is one of the highest in the European Union. Children continued to be more at risk of poverty and social exclusion than the general population and their share was 33.7% or 410,200 children. Particularly vulnerable are those living in a single-adult household, in families with more than 3 children, children of Roma and Turkish ethnicity, those not attending school, children with disabilities, children living in remote rural areas or in regions with limited employment, children of migrant and refugee families.

The Gini coefficient at the level of 39.6 (after social transfers) is the highest in the EU (EU average of 30.9), which indicates significant income inequalities and weak impact of social transfers. According to the Social Scoreboard introduced by the European Commission to measure the performance of EU Member States in light of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the situation in Bulgaria is assessed as critical with respect to: the income quintile ratio (S80/S20); the share of the people at risk of poverty or social inclusion; the share of population aged 15-24 years not in employment, education or training (NEETs); the impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty reduction; and the individual's level of digital skills.

In 2019, the Bulgarian authorities registered 2,092 irregular immigrants^[1] without valid permits or documents, which marks a decrease of 23,4 % as compared to the previous year. Despite the overall decrease of number, number, percentage of unaccompanied children remains the same (30 %).

[1] Ministry of Interior, Migration Statistics as of 30 Nov. 2019

Major contributions and drivers of results

Goal area 1

Early Childhood Development - More than 6000 caregivers of more than 6,500 children 0-3 years of age in Shumen and Sliven regions benefited from individualized support, guidance and information on nurturing care provided through the home visiting services, established with UNICEF support. A network of 40 municipalities, local libraries and cultural institutions, as well as social and educational service providers, delivered a community-based parenting support program developed by UNICEF reaching out to 680 caregivers of young children, including 168 parents of children with disabilities and developmental difficulties.

An evaluation of the UNICEF supported model of home visiting services was completed and its findings used to inform the development of a proposal for scale up of home visiting service nationally with EU funds as envisaged in national strategic documents related to deinstitutionalization. However, despite UNICEF advocacy and technical support, in a context of increased financial constraints in the health care system, toward the end of 2019 the Ministry of Health finally decided not to pursue the expansion because of concerns for availability of sustainable government funding after the end of the project. UNICEF is looking for alternative solutions to ensure sustainability of the models in partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

More than 300 service providers strengthened their competencies to effectively engage with parents to build their skills for parenting, as well improved their understanding of key concepts related to early childhood intervention through dedicated workshops, trainings and conferences, organized by UNICEF and partners. In addition, a module on ECD was integrated in the introductory training of Roma health mediators.

More than 22,000 caregivers of young children were reached through C4D messages on nurturing care through specific parenting support interventions, as well as UNICEF's digital channels and parenting online hub www.roditel.unicef.bg. During the first ever in Bulgaria Parenting Month which we dedicated to parents of children with disabilities, the CO co-created and consulted with parents, elevated their voice and produced a series of human-interest stories, educational videos, Goodwill Ambassador's testimonials, TV interviews and specialized articles – and reached with practical information, advices and experience sharing an audience of over 350 000 people on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube) and over 1 million in traditional media (TV, radio, print), and engaged over 15 000 people via UNICEF's digital channels and parenting online hub www.roditel.unicef.bg

Child care – 2,501 families and 3,735 children from vulnerable and isolated communities benefited from outreach and preventive services – Family Consultative Centres (FCCs), co-created by several municipalities and UNICEF. Through the Country Office advocacy, the Agency for Social Assistance adopted the design and concept of this FCC model and national scale-up was supported by updating the national methodology for provision of state-delegated community support services to apply the outreach approach and a wide range of intersectoral prevention programmes for children and family support. The Country Office envisages in 2020 to finalize concrete guidelines for providing services to the most vulnerable children and families from isolated communities based on the FCCs' experience and a training programme.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy was supported in finalization of the Analysis of the child protection (CP) system. The main objective of the analysis was the examination of the efficiency of the CP system – effective protection and support to children at risk, as well as the extent to which it addressed the individual needs of children and their families. A special focus of the analysis was on the social service workforce qualification, staffing, training, professional development, oversight and monitoring and quality assurance. The analysis provides a set of specific recommendations on capacity building, support and development of social service workforce that will be followed up in 2020.

The Country Office was a co-organizer of the Sofia international conference “De-I of Childcare: Investing in Change” that gathered together over 200 representatives of universities, education and training organizations, the European Commission and national authorities, international and local NGOs, service providers, and child policy/ child protection professionals

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from the world. The conference discussed results of the decade-long shift focus from the harm of placement in old-type specialized institutions to the benefits of living with a family and the importance of loving, stable, responsive relationships and caring environment. The result of the conference was commitment to further investment in childcare reforms, particularly prevention, gate keeping mechanism and quality of alternative care.

Goal area 2

Education

The country office focused its efforts on consolidating the results and experience from the modelling initiative for introducing inclusive education at pre-school level "Together from Kindergarten" and ensuring the sustainability of the model. This was done through continuing the methodological support to the pilot kindergartens, facilitating exchange of experience and lessons learned and documenting good practices for national scale-up. Over a period of 2,5 years, more than 5,000 children received support and over 500 teachers and 100 specialists had their skills and capacities strengthened as part of the modelling intervention. A national representative study on teacher attitudes and preparedness to deliver early inclusive education, included 3,000 kindergarten teachers, confirmed an increase with 10 % of positive attitudes towards including children with disabilities in mainstream education among teachers from the pilot kindergartens compared to 3% decrease in positive attitudes among teachers from non-pilot kindergartens. UNICEF organized a meeting with the line ministry, National Association of Resource Teachers, the National Education Inspectorate, municipalities, kindergartens, NGOs to agree on the way forward and immediate next steps for scaling-up early inclusive education.

UNICEF continued provide technical assistance to the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) in strengthening the capacities for needs` assessment of children with disabilities by introducing the functional assessment of disability- 70 representatives from the Regional Inclusive Education Support Centres were trained as trainers by an international consultant. A follow-up workshop was organized to collect feedback on the pilot functional assessments and provide recommendations for better application of the bio-psycho-social model of disability through ensuring stronger focus on children`s abilities.

The Country Office continued to work on public awareness raising and capacity development of professionals on the use assistive technologies. The second International Conference on Augmentative and Alternative Communication, organized with support from MES and UNICEF, gathered 400 representatives of the government, NGO, education experts, principals, teachers, parents and children with disabilities and international experts who discussed contemporary approaches and technologies for children and adults with communication difficulties. To accelerate the introduction of assistive technologies in educational settings, UNICEF and MES initiated a training programme to be implemented in 5 Regional Inclusive Education Support Centres and the development of a catalogue with information and guidance on the practical application of assistive technologies.

The Office continued to support the Government in increasing enrollment in pre-school and school education and reducing dropout. Based on the feedback within the consultative process for updating the enrolment teams Guidelines, supported by UNICEF, the Ministry of Education and Science introduced new measures into the Mechanism to further strengthen the capacities of schools to prevent dropout. Currently the MES and UNICEF are discussing the pilot implementation of the Dropout prevention modules, developed by UNICEF ECARO, as part of the prevention work in schools within the Mechanism.

The CO continued to work on promoting secondary education for Roma adolescent girls and to prevent child marriages in targeted Roma communities through engaging 540 adolescent girls and boys in motivational health and educational activities. A Study on attitudes and dreams for the future of secondary grade students was initiated in Montana and Berkovitsa and will inform the strengthening of prevention work.

The innovative educational model, developed by the online educational platform Ucha.se ("I learn") with UNICEF support, continued to be used as the preferred additional learning resource for catching up by 1,200 schools and 119,000 students.

Based on the results from the modelling work on introducing child rights education in school, UNICEF continued to support the Ministry of Education and Science with the effective implementation of the State educational standard on civic, health, environmental and intercultural education. The CO in partnership with "Teach for Bulgaria" initiated the development of a child rights framework curriculum, teaching and learning materials and teachers' training program to become part of citizenship education for children and adolescents.

An integrated campaign (external communication and C4D) for raising the awareness, sensitivity and intolerance of society, school communities and children towards violence in and around schools was implemented and reached 3 million

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peopled on traditional and digital media. Adolescents were engaged as agents of change and solution-holders via series of Youth Talks that helped design a national programme for whole-school response. The national programme on prevention of violence in schools, which was developed by an expert group, established by MES and supported by UNICEF, will be implemented in 5 pilot schools for a 3-year period.

UNICEF continued to provide recreational and non-formal education activities for asylum seeking children and adolescents in 4 registration and reception centres, 3 in Sofia and 1 in Harmanli. The age group of children between 10 and 14 years was the biggest one, followed by children in the age group 6-9. 314 children, including 125 UASC, and 66 women participated in a variety of regular activities, including Bulgarian and English language classes, science, art, music, sports, school preparation, Women's club, sessions on children's rights and life skills.

Goal area 3

Protection from violence, abuse and exploitation – UNICEF invested in further development of existing partnerships, evidence generation and data strengthening, robust advocacy, provision of technical support and convening representatives of the executive branch, academia, civil society organizations, justice sector professionals, children and young people to ensure better protection of children from violence and their equitable access to justice . More than 7 500 children (victims and witnesses of violence, including GBV, and crime, children in conflict with the law, children participants in civil and administrative proceedings, unaccompanied and separated children) benefitted from UNICEF supported child protection and justice/legal services through the work of 3 Child Advocacy Centres, the specialized units/panels in 6 Prosecutor's Offices and 7 Courts.

UNICEF focused on evidence generation and the availability and quality of data on violence against children and access to justice by providing support to the National Statistical Institute and relevant stakeholders to review and analyze the administrative data on national and local level. The piloting of the HQ developed "Strengthening Administrative Data on Justice for Children Quick Assessment Tool" gathered representatives of the National Statistical Institute, the Supreme Judicial Council, the Ministry of Interior, the State Agency for the Refugees, the Supreme Prosecutor's Office of Cassation, the Agency for Social Assistance and the Ombudsman's office to discuss the tool, its' implementation in the country and possible improvements, thus providing an objective baseline of the administrative data system on justice for children and starting to build consensus of needed improvements. The Automatic Information System for Prevention of Child Crime and Child Protection developed by the Ministry of Interior become nationwide and fully operational this year, allowing for provision of disaggregated data on: gender, age, family situation, educational status, type of violence, previous incidents, protection measures, legal proceedings, etc. on children at risk, children victims of crime, children over the age of criminal responsibility who have committed a crime, children in police protection, children detained by the police, including concrete timeframe of detention.

UNICEF provided technical support and advocacy for the finalisation and public consultation of the draft National Strategy for the Child 2019 – 2030, the development of 2019-2020 Action plan for the implementation of the National strategy for prevention of violence against children and abuse, for the finalization of the draft legislation concerning children in conflict with law - Educational Measures Act, the transposition of EU Directives creating stronger guarantees for children involved in criminal proceedings and the finalization of the new Social Services Act. Due to the growing anti-human rights and anti-child rights discourse, the government was cautious and the main legislative documents and strategies are on hold . At the same time, strong commitment from the state on ensuring the protection of unaccompanied and separated migrant children, supported by robust advocacy and technical support by UNICEF, UNHCR and Bulgarian Helsinki Committee resulted in amendments to the Law for Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria regularizing the stay of unaccompanied migrant children who have not applied for or have not been granted international protection.

To facilitate change and ensure progress in the protection of children from violence and guaranteeing their access to justice UNICEF strengthened its convening power and supported different fora for dialogue, sharing of experience and exchange of good practices. A sub-regional high-level conference on "Smart investment in strategies and partnerships to prevent and address violence against children" was jointly organized with the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the State Agency for Child Protection, UNICEF, World Health Organization (WHO), Child Protection Hub and supported by Terre des Hommes Foundation and the Alliance "Childhood without Violence". Participants discussed data, impact, prevention and response strategies and identified a set of technical and multi-sectoral actions to prevent and respond to violence against children and build strong partnerships in ECARO region. One of the concrete results of the conference is the planning of an ACE study to be done jointly with WHO in 2020.

The office supported a Legal Conference "Justice for Children in Bulgaria 30 years after the Convention on the Rights of the

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Child” organized jointly with the Bulgarian Centre for Non-profit Law Foundation, the National Institute of Justice, the Supreme Lawyer’s Council, the Supreme Judicial Council and the Institute for the State and Law with the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. More than 120 judges, prosecutors and lawyers discussed the international and European instruments and practices, Bulgarian jurisprudence and lawyer’s practices related to children’s rights and ensuring that the best interests of children are of primary consideration in all procedures involving children as parties or witnesses and proposed legislative changes and implementation of child-sensitive practices.

Goal area 5

Disability – The office analysed the situation of health, social and educational services for children with developmental difficulties and disabilities aged 0-6 years in order to gather evidence and build a shared vision among key stakeholders about development of a national early childhood intervention system. Support of inclusive education enabled knowledge sharing related to the use of augmentative and alternative communication technologies to enhance learning. Modelling initiative on early inclusive education was sustained and improved quality of services in 35 kindergartens.

The office dedicated the 30th anniversary of the adoption of CRC to the rights and inclusion of children and young people with disabilities. A year-round awareness-raising and social change campaign “With eyes open for all”, implemented in partnerships with significant number of civil society organisations, media, organisations of parents of children with disabilities and young people with disabilities culminated in November 20th with a National summit, showcasing positive experience of young people living with disabilities. An extensive media coverage reached 1.3 million people with messages and powerful human stories promoting the rights and abilities of children with disabilities.

Adolescent/Youth - the Office worked with and engaged adolescent girls and boys and young people as advocates on child rights in relation to CRC@30, on inclusive education for children with disabilities, on ending violence against children and on children’s participation in decision-making and policy-making at EU level. UNICEF supported the participation and empowered adolescents and young people to act strong advocates in the international conference on “Children’s participation in decision-making and policy-making at EU level” (Bucharest) and in the Regional Meeting “Mayors for Cities” (Athens).

Bulgarian adolescents joined the “Voices of Youth” blogging community and contributed to influencing the EU youth agenda around the elections for European Parliament by sharing their ideas and solutions on important issues for their communities such as climate change, online safety, youth participation and decision-making, inclusive education, employment, diversity and tolerance.

Throughout the year, UNICEF engaged adolescents in co-creating the Guidebook “My right to an opinion” dedicated to digital and media literacy and provided training to over 80 adolescent boys and girls.

Partnerships and business for results – The PSFR annual target was met at 82.23%% and BGN 1,966,639 (approx. USD 1,129,603) were raised. The strategic corporate partnerships with Piraeus Bank and Happy Bar&Grill were not renewed which lead to decrease in the overall income. In order to compensate the gap, the office accelerated engagement with new corporate partners such as Lidl. Also, the office increased the recruitment of individual pledge donors via two integrated media campaigns, telethon events and face-to-face.

Communication –The office prioritized the following topics : the 30th anniversary of the CRC and the rights of youth with disability, responding to VAC in school and Early childhood development. A special focus was dedicated to parents and positive parenting. Partnerships with the Government, media, the NGO sector and the business were further developed and strengthened to advocate for the best interest of children. An entire year awareness-raising and social change campaign on child rights “With eyes open for all” culminated at the end of the year with the national summit for youth and by youth with disability. An extensive media coverage was negotiated with more than 1.3 million people reached. The last phase of the campaign was built on the success of the Parenting month, dedicated to parents of children with disabilities. The office reached with practical information, advices and counselling an audience of over 350 000 people on social media and over 1 million in traditional media and engaged over 15 000 people via UNICEF’s digital channels and parenting online hub www.roditel.unicef.bg. A spring campaign on ECD and positive parenting was organized together with Lidl. It reached 1.8 million people in the first six months of the year with UNICEF messages on the importance of Early Childhood Development. The beginning of the year was marked by the campaign on countering VAC in school – “There’s no recess for violence in school” - a 3.5 month long awareness, advocacy, social change and fundraising mobilization. The office obtained the support of 12 media and managed to mobilize in kind donations of free media space at the amount of 400 000 Euros. During the campaign and the telethon that was organized on the same topic 3 million people were reached. The campaign

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was supported by 10 business partners.

Operational support for delivery of results for children -

The CO consists of 27 staff members and seven office-based consultants . The overall budget expenditure amounts to 3,717,781 USD from all sources of funds (RR/OR/BMA and ORE). Based on the PBR approval in 2017 and as part of the CPD implementation, several new staff members were recruited, including three Fundraising Associate and Fundraising Officer. The office has amended 13 Long Term Agreements (LTAs) for the following types of services: translations and interpretation services, printing of publications and other programmatic materials; donation webpage support; telemarketing, digital and direct marketing for the communications and fundraising activities; video productions, media monitoring. The office has organized 25 events and 170 trips , including 30 programatic visits and 9 spot checks. The decrease of travel compared to the previous year is by 28%.

The efficiency gains were made through petty cash threshold increase, constant use of the corporate credit card and transferring most of the transactions via Bank of America. The office continued application of zero VAT approach with vendors, use of rent-free premises which saves 70,000 USD annually. Security personnel is shared with other tenants in the building, which saves 2,000 USD per year.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

The country office continued to use the well-established strategies of testing/modelling innovative services, continuous monitoring and learning to gather the evidence and influence the policy development and legislative reform. However, excelling in the program did not lead to scaling up results for children. This approach (model -test – innovate – evaluate-scale up) was challenged, mainly due to reliance on the project-based approach and negative narrative on innovations. The office will change the strategy in 2020 and consolidate the results from modelling and invest stronger efforts in elevating models of engagement. More proactive advocacy, higher level of technical assistance and better negotiated financial tools for targeted modelling will be used.

A “new normal” - growing and well-organized anti child rights /human rights movement in the country significantly influenced the decisions of the government to put on hold the two major strategic legal documents – National Strategy for the child 2019-2030 and Act on Social Services. The both documents were supported by UNICEF and civil society and their adoption would allow for better protection of vulnerable families and children as well as the greater investment in diversification of quality services for children.

As a response to the changing environment, UNICEF focused on skills and tools and preparedness for the new dynamics and trends. In that regard, a partnership with the local agency was established for developing a crisis communication response.

Training for UNICEF staff , UN agencies and NGOs partners was organized and common agreement reached – to change the strategy , from being reactive to development of a preventative approach , i.e more present and positive messaging on child well being and good practice of the realization of children’s rights .

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A joint communication and strong alliance of all the partners is necessary to mitigate the negative impact of fake news and anti-rights movements. This will be further supported by investing more in winning support for the cause of children from the wider public and decision makers.

Also, the new trends and dynamics in the country will require the expansion and innovation of partnerships and greater use of European, regional and national influencers. UNICEF will explore these opportunities in 2020, including using the power of religious leaders. UNICEF met representatives of the three main religious leaders in 2019 and agreed to invest in awareness raising session on children`s rights for religious scholars in 2020.

Additionally, the main approach towards innovation of social services for children is still project based, including the use of EU structural funds which leads to a very limited and short-term impact on children. The government needs to be better supported in planning and designing the budgetary process and ensuring that the vulnerable municipalities, families, youth and children are benefitted from the constant services guaranteed through the secured budget.

UNICEF laid the ground in 2019 for leveraging the power of business and markets for children. The extensive series of meetings with the Presidents and leaders of the main Chambers of Commerce took place where UNICEF positioned itself and strengthened the links between the child rights, business and development /achievement of sustainable developmental goals. This will lead to the creation of Advisory Board of Business for children in 2020. UNICEF will use this newly created space to present the program products and call for co-creation with the business.

The Country Office launched a CRC@30 national campaign "With Eyes Open for All", dedicated to children with disabilities where adolescents and young people were empowered to be role-models and change agents in shifting public attitudes. The campaign culminated with a national summit on 20 November 2019 and placed adolescents and young people with disabilities at the center and amplified their voice. Following the Summit, the Country Office received a very strong and positive feedback about the uplifting impact of the event. The event was attended by all partners and diplomatic community in the country. This contribution of the office in building important and positive moments in the country is well noted and will be further strengthened in 2020. The office will invest more efforts in bringing together different profile of citizens to discuss and raise awareness on the main issues for children in the country and offer a facilitated dialogue to present solutions and show case positive practice.

The office will use the 2019 tested approach for stronger communication - integration of public communication and advocacy, mixing different communication channels (traditional media, digital, outdoor, UNICEF's channels), with a mix of Communication for development (C4D) channels/approaches and Communication for partnerships approaches. This will be as the key strategy to achieve and communicate results for children.