

## Bulgaria

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### Part 1: Situation update in the country

#### Demographic and social political environment

Bulgaria is an upper-middle-income country and has been a European Union member state since 2007, bordering with Greece, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Turkey. Its population was 7,050,034 people in 2017; children under 15 years make up 14.3 per cent (1,004,376). According to World Bank 2017 data, Bulgaria has a negative population growth rate of minus 0.73. Data from the 2011 census determined that Bulgarians make up 84.8 per cent, Turks 8.8 per cent and Roma 4.9 per cent. Bulgaria's Human Development Index for 2017 was 0.813, 51st of 189 states and territories, among states with high degree of human development and rank. The gender development index is 0.990 which is 46th place; the gender inequality index is 0.217, which is a high equality in Human Development Index achievements between women and men. Since May 2017, the Government has been led by the centre-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (member of the European People's Party), which formed a ruling coalition with the United Patriots, an alliance of nationalistic parties. The ruling coalition has a tiny majority in the Parliament (122 out of 240 seats); with two upcoming elections - for the European Parliament (May 2019) and local governments (October 2019) - changes in the Government might be expected along with further political fragmentation.

The trend in domestic revenue growth, as in the previous year, was faster than expected due to increased revenue from taxes and social security contributions, and spending remaining lower than planned. The consolidated government budget posted a surplus of US\$1.7 billion (BGN 2.8 billion) from January to November—a 17.9 per cent increase over the same period a year earlier. This is an estimation of a full year surplus of 0.5 per cent of Gross Domestic Product in 2018. The unemployment rate remains low at 6 per cent in November 2018, but the youth unemployment rate is twice as high (11.9 per cent in November 2018). The young, the low-skilled, the Roma and the rural population continue to face difficulties in entering employment.

Despite macro-economic stability, Bulgaria still struggles to attain the European Union standards in socio-economic development and social cohesion. The per-capita income is the lowest in the European Union at 47 per cent of the average for the European Union. The Gini coefficient at the level of 40.2 (after social transfers) is among the highest in the European Union (with European Union average of 30.7), which indicates income inequalities and weak impact of social transfers.

According to the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions study “Social Inclusion and Living Conditions“, almost half of the Bulgarian children (41.6 per cent or 509,900) live at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Particularly vulnerable are those living in poor households, in families with more than three children or with only one parent, children of Roma and Turkish ethnicity, those not attending school, children with disabilities living in remote rural areas or in regions with limited employment, children of migrant and refugee families (and particularly those who are unaccompanied and separated from their families) as well as children in resident care.

Bulgaria’s risk of poverty is above the European Union average, but is relatively stable at about 20 to 22 per cent of the Bulgarian population, with child poverty rate of 29.2 per cent. The share of poor is highest among the unemployed and part-time workers. Poverty estimates by household type indicate that the highest relative share of poor is among one-person households with a member over 65 years of age, households of single parents with children, and households with three or more children. If pensions and other social transfers are excluded from the household income, the poverty rate will increase to about 50 per cent.

Overall, the social protection system in the country is well established. Bulgaria developed a comprehensive system of services and social benefits intended to support all vulnerable groups and to reduce poverty and social exclusion. However, the system is fragmented with considerable gaps in coverage and many families do not access available services and benefits, or the support is not adequate to their needs. As a result, the contribution of services and benefits to reduce poverty and social exclusion is lower compared to other European Union countries. To address this challenge, the Government drafted a new Law on Social Services, which is expected to be approved by Parliament in the first semester of 2019.

One in five children in Bulgaria has one or both parent/s abroad (a migrant worker), 26 per cent of children in 5<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grade have one or both parents abroad. The percentage of children whose mother is abroad is 5.3; 15.1 per cent of the children have a father who is abroad. For 2.7 per cent of the children both parents are absent, and 2.8 per cent have a non-Bulgarian parent, who lives abroad. The state institutions do not collect information about these children; there is no specialized monitoring, analysis or assessment of the situation.

### **Survival**

The infant mortality rate in Bulgaria is continuously declining and dropped from 9.2 per 1000 live births in 2007 to the current level of 6.4 per 1,000 live births. However, it remains twice higher than the European Union average of 3.6 per 1000 live births. In some parts of the country, the mortality rate of children up to one year old is almost three times higher than the national average. Despite the sustainable downward trend, the mortality rate during the first year of life remains higher than the European Union average. The neonatal mortality rate in Bulgaria in 2017 was 3.8 per 1,000 live births, compared to 2.52 per 1,000 average for the European Union. Reducing infant deaths requires further measures to increase access to and quality of care during pregnancy, birth and in the post-natal period especially for at risk

populations.

As many as 9.44 per cent of the live births are from adolescent girls and women below 20 and in some regions the percentage is even higher. Abortion before 12 weeks is legal in Bulgaria and the average share of abortions among young women aged under 20 is 36.7 per 100 live births of women of the same age group. A major cause of pregnancies and abortions among adolescents include harmful social norms in some communities, early initiation of sexual life and risky sexual behavior in a context of inadequate sexual education at school and lack of access to sexual and reproductive health youth-friendly services. Thus, 40 per cent of the 15-year old boys and 20 per cent of same age girls admit they have already had a sexual intercourse, but only 56 per cent of the girls and 66 per cent of the boys have used a condom in their latest sexual intercourse.

### **Learning**

According to the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute the group net coefficient of enrolment of children in kindergartens for 2017/2018 is 78.4 percent, a decline from previous years. The national goal for Bulgaria is 90 per cent of coverage in pre-school education. The number of children in kindergartens and other early childhood education services in 2017 was 52,522 or about 20 per cent of the children under three years old, which is still far below the Barcelona goal of 33 per cent. According to Eurostat, the share of 'early leavers' from education and training in Bulgaria for 2017 is 12.7 per cent (12 per cent men and 13.5 per cent women), which is higher than the Europe 2020 national target of 11 percent. At the same time, the share of public spending for education in Bulgaria remains lowest in the European Union at about 4 per cent of gross domestic product in 2015.

Inequality among children by ethnic group remains: 45 per cent of Roma children are not attending pre-school education or kindergarten, and 15 per cent do not go to school at all. Only an estimated half of the children with disabilities are integrated into mainstream education system, while around 8,000 children with disabilities are not in in school.

The main barriers to accessing education are related to poverty and the parents' inability to pay the hidden costs of education, parents' low education level, poor health, poor command of the Bulgarian language, prejudices and discriminatory attitudes to ethnic minorities. Educational results are also below the expectations and below the average level of the OECD countries, as Bulgaria ranks 45th out of 72 countries participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and more than 40 per cent of children are functionally illiterate in reading and mathematics.

### **Protection**

The child protection system in Bulgaria is defined by the Child Protection Act, adopted in 2000. The Act defines "child protection" as a system of legislative, administrative and other measures to guarantee realization and protection of child rights. The system consists of 147 child protection departments, with less than 900 social workers who are engaged directly with cases of children at risk, including children victims of violence. In 2017, the total number of cases

managed by social workers from the child protection departments was 34,768. Also, child protection departments worked on 33,361 signals received for children at risk. In 2017, social workers evaluated a total number of 900 candidates for foster parents and prospective adoptive parents. Also, child protection departments were involved in 18,595 court proceedings related to rights and interests of children, without cases managed by the child protection departments. As of December 2017, the total number of cases of prevention of abandonment managed by social workers from child protection departments was 3,943 and the total number of reintegration cases 1,627. The main challenges are lack of sufficient human resources (high workload, low motivation, burn-out effect, staff turnover and attitudes for short-term stay in the profession); lack of a system for capacity development – no regular training, support or supervision; no uniform standards for social work with children and no monitoring mechanism in place.

In the recent decade, Bulgaria achieved an impressive progress in the child care system reform and more specifically in ensuring the child's right to live in a family environment. The number of children in institutions of the old type decreased from 7,587 in 2010 to 680 in December 2018. As of Nov 2018, there were 4,886 children placed in extended families, 2,250 children placed in foster care and 3,097 children placed in small-scale residential care services.

Corporal punishment is prohibited under the Child Protection Act (2000), the Family Code (2009) and the Pre-school and School Education Act (2015). In February 2017, the Council of Ministers approved a National Program for the Prevention of Violence and Abuse of Children for the period 2017 – 2020, however violence against children continues to be widespread in society both as a practice and a social norm.

The number of people convicted for violence is low, and children in Bulgaria still cannot seek and get fair, timely and effective legal protection when their rights are violated. Administrative data on the number of children victims of violence is disjointed and contradictory: in 2017, the child protection departments reported to have received only 1,282 signals for violence against children and opened only 382 cases; the prosecutor's office reports the initiation of 1,160 criminal proceedings for crimes related to violence against children and the Ministry of Education and Science reports that over 80 per cent of the schools in the country had submitted at least one child abuse report.

Online violence and bullying is increasing: 28.7 per cent of children in Bulgaria report to have been victims of bullying (10 per cent more than in 2010) and 38 per cent of them report that it has happened online, 10.5 per cent of the age group 12-14 and 21.1 per cent in the age group 13-17 were subject to sexting (2016).

With the establishment of the national coordination mechanism for combating violence against children, the official commitment for intersectoral coordination improved, but the implementation in practice is still weak. There are governmental initiatives to improve children's access to justice, focusing primarily on children as participants in legal proceedings, children in conflict with the law and children victims and witnesses of violence and crimes. Despite

numerous recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and Council of Europe in juvenile justice reform, advocacy efforts, legislative reforms remain at a slow pace.

### **Equitable chance in life**

The processes of data collection about children in Bulgaria are improving, particularly with the recently launched integrated information system of the Agency for Social Assistance. Another positive development is the strong commitment of the Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria in conducting an independent monitoring of the rights of the most vulnerable children and the strengthened capacity of several non-governmental organizations for monitoring and reporting the enforcement of children's rights.

However, the lack of disaggregated data, lack of uniform methods of collection and analysis of information, in combination with the gaps in the national systems for monitoring rights of the child and the limited research at household level, are seriously challenging development of child-related evidence-based policies.

Since 2013, Bulgaria evidenced a growing influx of asylum seekers, mostly due to the war in Syria and other conflicts and/or persecution of people in the Middle East and North Africa. The peak was reached in 2015, with 20,391 applicants for international protection, after which numbers started to decrease as asylum seekers were choosing alternative routes.

In 2017 and 2018 (as of the end of November), 3,700 and 2,255 people, respectively, applied for international protection. Despite the currently small numbers of arrivals, the level of vulnerability remains the same. Children account for more than 30 per cent of all who have submitted applications for international protection in the period January – November 2018. The top countries of origin are Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. The Government improved the conditions for acceptance of applications and basic needs of asylum seekers in terms of accommodation, food and medical care. Good practices were identified for inter-institutional cooperation and coordination in facilitating the access of asylum-seeking and refugee children to the Bulgarian education system, as well as working to ensure that unaccompanied and separated children are not detained.

Following the adoption of the legal ban on detention of these children from December 2017, there were court decisions that provided breakthrough findings and rulings against this detention. Despite progress, however, challenges remain with regards to protection of unaccompanied children and children separated from their families due to the insufficient capacity of the child protection system to assume its obligations. There is an inadequate number and preparedness of staff, lack of practical experience in addressing the needs of migrant children, language and cultural barriers, a lack of procedure to regularize the children's stay in Bulgaria and lack of availability of social services. Despite the positive and promising practice in ensuring access to services for children on the move, the Government of Bulgaria did not support 'the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration'.

## Part 2: Major Results including in humanitarian action and gender, against the results in the Country Programme Documents

The first year of implementation of the new Country Programme 2018-2020 resulted in several major results, including: development of an investment case for promoting and allocation of resources in the early years, supported throughout the Bulgarian Presidency in the European Union; the stepping up of the second phase of the child care reform focusing on upgrading quality of services for children in family or family-like environments while supporting horizontally other countries in the region to learn from this experience and sharing lessons learned; upgrading education services and reaching the most vulnerable parents, children, including children with disabilities and migrant and refugee children; contribution to improved child-related policy framework resulting in concrete legislative changes (yet to be implemented); modelling family centres, child advocacy centres, inclusive education models and home visiting services with gradual development of commitment, and plans for national scale up; and continuous investment in data collection and analysis to support the evidence-based policy development process.

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

The country programme partnership for the period 2018-2022 supports the national efforts to ensure that all children, particularly the most disadvantaged, fully develop to their full human potential during early childhood. The interventions aim to promote legislation, institutional arrangements, budget allocations and cross-sectoral coordination to facilitate equitable access of all children to quality support for early childhood development.

Policy advocacy at the European and national levels: UNICEF in 2018 continued its support for consolidating the national policy framework with relevance to early childhood development through advocacy engagement at European Union and at national level. During the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of European Union, early childhood development was prioritized. UNICEF recognized this enabling political moment and contributed to the policy dialogue at the European Union level: three high-level European Union policy discussions were used as an avenue to advocate and promote the importance of investment in the early years (the informal meeting of the social protection committee; the conference “The future of work: A lifecycle approach”, where a dedicated panel was organized and chaired by the UNICEF Regional Senior Advisor on early childhood development; and the Health Future of Europe: Healthy Nutrition for Children conference). This resulted in development of three council conclusions that strengthened the awareness and encouraged the member states to improve policies in support of early childhood development.

At the national level, the joint efforts of UNICEF and civil society partners resulted in an increased political commitment to strengthen support for early childhood development. The draft National Strategy on the Child is being finalized and raised attention to early childhood development. The development of an integrated early childhood development strategy has been initiated and led by the Ministry of Education and Science.

**Partnership building on early childhood development:** A national early childhood development alliance was established in Bulgaria with participation of more than 44 civil society organizations, individuals/professionals and members of academia to strengthen advocacy and communication for social change on early childhood development. UNICEF and the National Network for Children, For Our Children Foundation and the Trust for Social Achievement provided support and led the process of alliance building.

**Modeling:** Focus was on strengthening national capacities for early identification of children with developmental difficulties and disabilities, including through the primary health system, early intervention and delivery, as well as expanding support for caregivers to provide nurturing care to young children and positive parenting. UNICEF invested in modeling interventions to strengthen parenting support. The demonstration home visiting services, established by UNICEF in two regions of the country, provided 6,000 families of children age zero to two with individual guidance, information and education for nurturing care. The model should be fully scaled up in 2019.

### **Child care**

With UNICEF support for the design and model of the five family centres, 2,334 vulnerable children benefited from services such as access to kindergarten, health care and education, and 1,668 families strengthened their parental skills. The family centres services prevent family separation and abandonment of children. The Agency for Social Assistance adopted the design and concept of this model and national scale up will be supported in 2019.

**Policy and advocacy:** benefiting from the positive political climate during the Bulgarian Presidency of the European Union, UNICEF supported the country in sharing experience and lessons learned from the child care reform. A high-level forum "Family and community-based care for children across Europe: Lessons learned and commitments for action at national and European Union level" was held in Brussels and led to the development of a policy paper for the members states on the child care reforms.

**Improving the quality of care:** The de-institutionalization process in the country is widely recognized as a success. However, the country will need to address challenges related to weak prevention mechanism and family support services, limited quality of care and capacity of the workforce. In that regard, UNICEF in 2018 supported the development of a comprehensive training programme for foster care commissions which will be used nationwide. This builds upon the training programme for foster families developed in the previous year (2017) and aims to strengthen the multi-disciplinary and multisectoral delivery of services. Since UNICEF started supporting foster care in the country ten years ago, the number of foster families rose from under 100 foster parents in 2007 to more than 2,300 foster parents at the end of 2018.

**South-South cooperation:** UNICEF Bulgaria facilitated the process of mutual learning on the child care reform, de-institutionalization and migration among the countries in the region and beyond. Technical exchanges were organized with Armenia and Peru and the country hosted

governmental delegations from Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia and Morocco.

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

### **Inclusive education**

**Modeling:** UNICEF Bulgaria assessed and documented results from the modeling initiative for inclusive education at pre-school level “Together from kindergarten”, developing pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes in inclusive education; supporting the implementation of the cross-sectoral coordination for increasing enrollment in pre-school and school education; and reducing dropout, improving learning outcomes through innovative approaches and ensuring access to recreational activities and non-formal learning to refugee and migrant children. The quality of services improved in 35 kindergartens (models) and knowledge, skills; attitudes of staff was positively changed; and interaction with parents improved. The kindergartens improved capacity to early detect children with special educational needs and intervene: 396 children received intensive individual support and 4,230 children received general support.

**Teacher skills:** The in-service teacher training programme, developed in partnership with “Karin Dom” and the National Association of Resource Teachers, was accredited; the programme is available for all teachers in the country. UNICEF in partnership with universities, assisted the Government to develop a framework for introducing pre-service teacher training on inclusive education and introducing 15-hours mandatory pre-service teacher training on inclusive education through amendment in the Regulation on the Professional Qualification of Teachers. These changes will improve the policy framework for inclusion of children with learning difficulties in the education system. The modelling initiative “Together from Kindergarten” was assessed and documented. Recommendations included scaling-up inclusive education practices by strengthening the “whole school approach”, complementing leadership, management, teaching and learning, and by developing funding scenarios as well as mechanisms for cooperation/coordination between kindergartens and external services.

### **Children out-of-school**

**Support to the joint mechanism:** UNICEF continued to support the Government in increasing enrollment in pre-school and school education and reducing dropout. There was a pilot mechanism for the joint operation of institutions of coverage and inclusion in the educational system of children and students in compulsory preschool and school education, established by the Council of Ministers in 2017 as part of Government effort to ensure that school-age children are enrolled in school. It was transformed into a permanent instrument for cross-sectoral cooperation, and during the academic year 2017-2018, 23,898 compulsory school-age children not enrolled in school were returned to education. Unfortunately, 2,124 dropped out again (708 went abroad and 235 turned 16 and were not subject to compulsory education anymore) and 9,375 children could not be returned to school before the end of the academic year.

These facts and figures motivated the Ministry of Education and Science to request UNICEF to conduct a rapid assessment of the pilot and develop guidelines for the enrollment teams with

the involvement of all participating national institutions, local authorities and schools. A training of trainers on the guidelines for representatives of all 28 regions was conducted in the beginning of the new academic year 2018/2019 and improved the work of the enrollment teams.

**Learning outcomes:** UNICEF Bulgaria invested in supporting and improving learning outcomes through innovative approaches. The partnership with the online educational platform Ucha.se (“I learn”) to develop an innovative model for improved learning outcomes of children was completed. An online tool was developed for students in primary and lower secondary education (grades 1 to 7) to identify their learning gaps (diagnostic tests in the main subjects). Based on test results, the online platform generates an individual learning programme for catching up. A total of 1,300 schools used the online education platform as an additional learning resource. The model, developed and tested with UNICEF support, will be used by Ucha.se to prepare diagnostic tests to cover the curriculum in secondary education as well (grades 8 to 12).

The model to introduce child-rights education in school with the establishment of UNICEF clubs as an extracurricular activity in schools was completed. Within the UNICEF club children and adolescents learn about their rights; debate on local, national and international issues; and work together on finding solutions to problems in their school or community. During the 2017-2018 school year, more than 120 adolescent girls and boys 14-18 years old were engaged in nine UNICEF clubs across the country and worked together on issues related to prevention of bullying and violence, inequality and social exclusion, justice and peace, climate change and sustainable development, health and healthy life-style, and implemented small projects to promote the rights of the child at school and community level.

Based on the experience gained through the modelling work at school level, UNICEF will support the Ministry of Education to include child rights issues and Sustainable Development Goals (through the World Largest Lesson initiative) in the formal learning curricula as part of the citizenship education programme.

**Migration:** With cooperation between state institutions, international and national non-governmental organizations, and overall efforts to make the education system inclusive, 388 asylum-seeking children enrolled in Bulgarian schools. The “We play and learn” staff in the four refugee centres offered invaluable support both prior to and after the start of the school year through: intensive Bulgarian tutoring, introduction to the school system, organizing celebrations, accompanying children to and from school, regular contact with parents and teachers and directors, and daily homework-support activities. Additional material support to children enrolled in Bulgarian schools was provided, including the most basic school materials that the children in Sofia and Harmanli needed for the start of the school year, such as rucksacks, notebooks and stationery.

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

**Modeling:** UNICEF continued with modeling of the child advocacy centres in three regions Sofia, Shumen and Montana. The centres provided integrated services for psycho-social support, medical assistance, legal aid and child-sensitive forensic interviewing for 160 child victims of violence and 148 parents. The new Social Services Act, currently being discussed in Parliament, is introducing child advocacy centres in the child protection system. A full national scale-up of the model is expected by the end of 2021.

**Policy and advocacy:** UNICEF completed an in-depth analysis and assessment of the national legislation regarding the prevention, identification, reporting and response to violence against children. This analysis supported the state agency for child protection in revising the national mechanism for coordination of violence against children cases and crisis intervention. The revised coordination structure will be adopted by the Government in 2019.

UNICEF partnership with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee in advocacy and provision of technical support resulted in revision and amendments of the Regulations and the Law on Aliens in the Republic of Bulgaria. The amendments introduced provisions for referral to child protection departments, representation, the possibility of implementation of police custody, interpretation and legal aid for unaccompanied and separated children in the national immigration procedures. They also included the best interest assessment and determination during these procedures. The new regulations build on the ban on detention of unaccompanied and separated children, which was stipulated in the Law on the Ministry of the Interior in December 2017, safeguarding protection of the rights of separated and unaccompanied children.

**Juvenile justice reform:** Despite the joint efforts of UNICEF and partners from the civil society, the adoption of the draft Act on Diversion from Criminal Proceedings and Implementation of Educational Measures, once again, was delayed due to the lack of political commitment for the justice reform. Children under the minimum age of criminal responsibility (14) and children who have committed status offences continue to be subject to correctional and punitive measures. For example, 111 children between the ages of 10 and 19 are in so-called correctional facilities, managed by the Ministry of Education and Science.

**Evidence generation:** UNICEF Bulgaria supported the national study on violence against children and results will be presented in 2019. The Ministry of Interior launched an informational data base on children in conflict with the law and child victims of violence, which will provide disaggregated data (gender, age, family situation, educational status, disability of children victims, type of violence, previous incidents, protection measures, legal proceedings). UNICEF provided technical assistance in the development of the system, consulted the indicators and supported training of police officers responsible to process the data.

**Capacity building:** UNICEF supported capacity building and the specialization of professionals dealing with children in contact with the law. Modeling of juvenile justice specialized panel supported six prosecutor offices and seven courts. A total of 1,982 children, parties in the legal procedures, benefitted from the strengthened capacity and child-sensitive

proceedings implemented by the specialized units/panels.

UNICEF in partnership with the National Institute for Justice and the Ministry of Interior, trained 200 police officers, prosecutors and judges on child rights and child-friendly procedures. This partnership will build the capacity of the justice professionals in the next three years.

**Migration:** This year UNICEF continued advocating and supporting the introduction of mechanisms for provision of specialized free legal aid to children through building partnerships with the bar associations and strengthening the cooperation with the National Legal Aid Bureau and the Supreme Lawyer's council. More than 474 children benefitted from legal aid (consultation and representation) by UNICEF-trained and -supported lawyers in partnership with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, including 225 unaccompanied migrant children, 170 children in civil and administrative procedures and 79 child victims of violence.

Despite the legal ban on detention of unaccompanied children, cases still occur when migrant children are with adults who are not related to them, or they are recorded automatically as adults, thus making their legal representation for appealing the detention crucial. The provision of legal representation to 30 unaccompanied children in detention in 2018 continued to build a steady jurisprudence in the administrative courts, with judges consistently ruling all cases of detention in contradiction with the law, the basic standards for child care and protection.

In addition, 53 unaccompanied and separated migrant children were supported with family reunification. According to data provided by Bulgarian Helsinki Committee almost 100 per cent of unaccompanied and separated children (219 unaccompanied children for the first eleven months of 2018) intercepted by the police were attached to unrelated adults or recorded as adults and detained, which puts them at high risk of violence and exploitation. Unaccompanied and separated children accounted for approximately 40 per cent of all detained children in 2016 (2,439 unaccompanied and separated children of a total 5,833), nearly 30 per cent of the children in detention in 2017 (189 unaccompanied and separated children, of a total 712) and 50 per cent in the first eleven months of 2018 (219 unaccompanied and separated children, for a total 438).

UNICEF, in partnership with Caritas, continued the "We play and learn" project for providing recreational and non-formal education activities for asylum-seeking children and adolescents in 12 safe spaces located in four registration and reception centres of the State Agency for Refugees. This year, 478 children participated in regular, full-day recreational and non-formal education activities, including: Bulgarian and English language classes, science, art, music, sports, school preparation, sessions on children's rights and life skills. UNICEF played significant role in assisting the State Agency for Refugees in coordinating overall response for people on the move, including children; this will lead to co-creating more sustainable solutions and services for children on the move in 2019 under the leadership of the State Agency for Refugees.

**Gender-based violence:** With funding from the U.S. State Department Bureau for Population,

Migration and Refuge, UNICEF Bulgaria together with Greece and Serbia participated in the sub-regional initiative on gender-based violence. The initiative in Bulgaria resulted in the review of the protection system, available services and resources available to support gender-based violence survivors. At the same time, 100 frontline workers from the State Agency for Refugees, Migration Directorate at the Ministry of the Interior, the Agency for Social Assistance, regional police departments, non-government organizations, service providers, psychologists, lawyers and prosecutors were trained on topics related to gender-based violence (national and international legislation, prevention, identification, referral and response to the needs of gender-based violence survivors, specific vulnerabilities of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants), as well as the topic of prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse in the work with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

Direct support to a total of 26 people at risk and survivors of gender-based violence was provided, including individual psychotherapeutic consultations, psychosocial support, covering medical expenses and other urgent and individual needs. UNICEF supported development of the guidelines for professionals dealing with gender-based violence cases, presented at the end of 2018 and will be widely disseminated in 2019. The upgrade of professional skills, developed standards of care and service provision on gender-based violence will inform ongoing analysis of child protection system and recommendations for improving overall protection system, in line with the new stipulated changes in legislation.

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

In times of accelerated legislative reforms in the country, and demonstration of innovative models of services for children, the importance of evidence-based policy making is strongly emphasized. The available data on women and children in the country was presented by UNICEF towards the end of the year, gathering main stakeholders in the country and obtaining the commitment from the Government, civil society and international community to address the gaps in child-related data and ensure better analysis of data.

The main gaps are related to situation of children with disabilities and lack of overall disaggregation of data for children and women. In addition to the quantitative data, a qualitative data should be introduced and analyzed for children and women, particularly related to social norms, stereotypes and attitudes. A situation analysis of the national capacities for early identification and early intervention for children under six years old with developmental difficulties and disabilities was initiated to design future interventions. Limited awareness of the importance of early intervention, and lack of a clear institutional leadership on the issue, was identified as a key constraint for intervention. This work in 2019 will include communication for social change, to address negative stereotypes and attitudes.

UNICEF supported independent monitoring and worked closely with the ombudsman office and non-government organizations ensuring that the situation of children is documented, with a special attention to refugee and migrant children. Several studies were initiated including an analysis of the child protection system to assess effectiveness, analyze whether it is child-

centered and rights-based, determine if it aligns with international and professional standards and formulate recommendations, including strategies to strengthen the social workforce.

In 2019, UNICEF Bulgaria will work with the national partners to develop instruments and tools for measuring child-focus public expenditures. This will contribute to better analyses and effective implementation of the several strategic documents, including the National Strategy for the Child (2019-2030) and the Social Services Act, currently discussed in the Parliament.

### **Cross sectoral development**

Programme results and technical dialogue with the Government and civil society on reaching the most vulnerable and excluded children and families was aligned with communicating and advocating externally.

### **Communication**

Communication for partnership and social change was widely used as a multi-sectoral strategy in 2018 to align the country office with UNICEF's new global Strategic Plan (2018-2021). The Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the Europe was an excellent opportunity to strengthen and accelerate external communication and communication for development, promote and advocate for children's rights.

UNICEF Bulgaria had a three milestones of communication and engagement: support for high-level forums and production of advocacy assets which informed a new, more holistic European Union approach on early childhood development; provision of diverse voices for more inclusive goals of the new European Union Youth Strategy (2019-2027); renewed commitment in the next European Union financial period for investment in de-institutionalization. UNICEF in Bulgaria worked with headquarters, the regional office, country offices and National Committees, demonstrating the value of upstreaming UNICEF's one voice through the largest provider of development cooperation – the European Union.

UNICEF consolidated the programme, communication and fundraising efforts to organize and deliver two campaigns: on early childhood development and ending violence at school. The campaign on early childhood development reached parents of young children and was aligned with the global efforts to position the organization as leading source for parental advice. The campaign resulted in creation of the first online repository for parents "Care, love, play". The campaign on ending violence at school "Together against violence in schools" used external communication (strategic media partnerships) in combination of a mix of communication-for-development tools and forums (Youth Talks 2nd 'World's Largest Lesson') and innovations (Virtual Reality Room) to spark solidarity and engage children as agents of change.

UNICEF Bulgaria continued its investment in adolescents as agents of change through the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals. The global initiative World's Largest Lesson was implemented for fourth consecutive year. During the 2017-2018 school year, a total of 630 schools held World's Largest Lesson – from eradication of poverty, through quality education and healthcare, to clean planet – reaching around 50,000 and engaging around 20,000

children.

A peak of communication engagement was World Children's Day, when UNICEF Bulgaria encouraged the nation to #GoBlue in support of child rights. The UNICEF team, corporate partners, landmark buildings, children in schools and kindergartens, and even the circus joined the initiative. UNICEF in Bulgaria also co-organized and supported two mirroring high-level events: a launch at the Bulgarian Parliament of the "voices of children" national study on matters that concern Bulgarian children, and the European Youth Event which gathered at the European Parliament around 800 adolescents from across European Union, including Bulgaria, to discuss with policy-makers what "Europe Kids Want".

UNICEF was part of the regional initiative (Albania, Bulgaria, Georgia and Turkmenistan) on reducing discrimination and promoting social inclusion of Roma children and young people, and children and youth people with disabilities in Europe and Central Asia region, supported by the David Beckham Fund for UNICEF. Bulgaria focused on reducing service providers' negative attitudes and stereotypes and promoting respect for diversity in two model regions: Shumen and Sliven. With the initiative, 290 adolescents became agents of change in their communities (via the first ever child-led researches by seekers of (in)equalities and "Voice it" youth forums); over 300 kindergarten and school teachers learned how to support the inclusion of Roma children and promote diversity in their communities; 73 social and health service providers were sensitized on how stereotypes affect the quality of services delivered to ethnic minorities; over 100 non-government organizations and civil society organizations were trained by the National Network for Children.

A milestone for the communication for social change efforts was the launch of the 'ethical reporting and promotion of child rights in media' programme, in partnership with the Association of European Journalists-Bulgaria. A Guidebook for Ethical Reporting on Children in Media was co-created with top journalists, psychologists, lawyers, public relations specialists, videographers and photographers. Around 100 key journalists were trained – all of them key agents of social change. Training programmes were developed for public relations' specialists, film makers, photographers and students, and joint seminars held with national institutions such as the State Agency for Child Protection.

In 2018, UNICEF Bulgaria's presence in traditional media scored 31.12 per cent positive, 68.88 per cent neutral and 0 per cent negative tone in articles or other materials that mention UNICEF or its messages. Performance indicators in social media include: 115,000 followers, 4,910,042 reach and 4.3 per cent engagement rate in Facebook; 3,102 followers, 454,500 reach and 0.5 per cent engagement rate in Twitter; 1,529 followers, 8,900 likes and 63 comments in Instagram; 229,250 views on YouTube. Another important development is that from September 2018, UNICEF Bulgaria concluded the digital transformation project and migrated online content onto the new global UNICEF platform – the new website had 36,623 unique users, 4,994 returning users, and 47,277 sessions since September 2018. The old site had 44,833 users, 116,022 page views, 62,366 sessions: 31 per cent new visitors, 69 per cent returning visitors.

## **Fundraising and private sector partnerships 2018**

Funds raised locally totaled US\$ 1.3 million (2.1 million BGN). UNICEF faced several challenges: the official donation page was closed over six months due to a cyberattack; General Data Protection Regulation negatively impacted the office's donor house-list; the telethon event was postponed for 2019. The absence of a major pledge donor acquisition event resulted in fewer new pledge donors. Despite this, UNICEF Bulgaria negotiated an increase of the maximum possible amount for monthly SMS charging (from five to 10 Bulgarian levs) resulting with increased opportunity for income optimization and upgrade of the existing SMS donors - 740 pledge SMS donors with US\$ 5.75 (10 Bulgarian levs) were recruited before the end of 2018.

The focus was on donor retention and improving supporters' experience via timely and regular communication, engaging content and reporting. The partnerships with Happy Bar and Grill, Giulian and Orange Centre were renewed and expanded to engage the partners, their customers and employees. The country office expanded collaboration with the global partners (H&M, MAC, Melia, CCC) as well as local prospects. During the World Child Day campaign, significant engagement with 24 companies, including four largest employers in Bulgaria (60K, Infoleven, MM Solutions, DHL) was carried out. The #GoBlue event used the corporate platforms to involve employees and customers.

UNICEF Bulgaria conducted an integrated fundraising and awareness campaign on early childhood development that generated US\$ 43,750 (70,000 BGN). The two-step approach to the acquisition of pledge donors was tested, resulting with 1,350 parents of young children engaged in positive parenting messages. Over 2,000,000 people were reached with early childhood development advocacy messages and fundraising appeal via the employee and customer networks of 10 corporate partners (global partners such as IKEA, H&M, DHL as well as local partners Orange, Piraeus Bank, Pandora, Comsed, Grand Optics, Helen Doron). Over 30 media partners and five celebrities were involved to support the initiative pro-bono, covering over 200,000 people online. UNICEF invested its limited resources in development of an in-house face-to-face programme. The initial tests demonstrated potential for donor engagement and pledge income generation.

## **Operations**

UNICEF Bulgaria consists of 26 staff members and five office-based consultants that contribute to UNICEF Bulgaria results. The overall budget expenditure amounts to US\$ 3,449,204 from all sources of funds (regular resources/other resources/BMA and other resources-emergency). Based on the programme and budget approval in 2017 and part of the child protection implementation, new staff members were recruited including three programme officers, a communications for development analyst and international deputy representative. Six requests for proposal cases were discussed, analyzed and recommended for approval during the three contract review committee meetings. The office had 18 long-term agreements for the following types of services: translation and interpretation services, printing publications and other programm materials; donation webpage support; telemarketing, digital and direct marketing for

the communications and fundraising activities, video productions, media monitoring, travel services and event management.

UNICEF Bulgaria organized and coordinated 25 events: meetings, workshops, trainings and three study visits of foreign delegations. Also, UNICEF Bulgaria organized and implemented 86 trips in 2018 that included participation in conferences, workshops, meetings, trainings, programmatic visits and spot checks. All 'harmonized approach to cash transfer' activities were regularly monitored and the required programmatic visits (39) and spot checks (13) were performed by the respective staff members. The country office performed three micro-assessments of implementing partners with expiring risk assessments.

The efficiency gains were made through petty cash threshold increase, introduction of the corporate credit card and piloting transactions via Bank of America. All this helped UNICEF Bulgaria reduce the number of transactions through the local bank and improve efficiency in payment. All staff received new laptops, and this contributed to work efficiency by using flexible working arrangement and remote working. The office continued cost-saving practices: continuous application of zero VAT approach with vendors, use of rent free premises for the sixth year to ensure annual saving of US\$55,000. Security personnel is shared with other tenants in the building, which ensure saving of US\$ 2,000 per year.

UNICEF Bulgaria introduced zero usage of single-use plastics on the premises and at official events.

### Part 3: Lessons learned and constraints

#### **Every child survives and thrives**

**Better analysis of global and regional trends:** It is of paramount importance to analyze global, European and national political trends to discern the impact and power to influence the child rights agenda in Bulgaria. With the Bulgarian Presidency in the European Union helped promote investment in the early years, proving that the child rights' agenda should be politically supported at the highest levels.

A less positive experience with the public debate related to the ratification of the Council of Europe's convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as the Istanbul Convention. The ruling of the Bulgarian Constitutional Court (27 July 2018) that the Convention does not conform to the Constitution revealed increasing sensitivities around the definition of gender specifically, and human and child rights. In that regard, UNICEF Bulgaria will more-proactively seek support from the regional office and headquarters communication teams.

**Social policy and delivery of results at scale:** UNICEF Bulgaria demonstrated its ability to mobilize partners and conceptualize, organizing delivery of innovative services for change in the legislation. However, maintaining the quality of services and delivering results at scale are

still challenging. While the Government appreciates UNICEF's technical experience in conceptualizing and modeling, UNICEF is not sufficiently involved in the national budget discussion and perhaps not seen as the most relevant partner to influence the (re) allocation of funds for children. Some well-designed models of services for children are at risk due to lack of financial projection.

In 2019, UNICEF will be proactive in delivering cost analysis of models that are not fully owned by the Government, and using this evidence for advocacy. Financial projections should be developed on different scenarios of scaling and related costs, as well as human resource investment and workforce costs to sustain the quality of services.

UNICEF Bulgaria will continue to support the Government in implementation of the Social Services Act to better regulate all service in the country. In parallel, UNICEF Bulgaria will establish regular contacts and partnership with the Ministry of Finance, and invest in scaling up proven models such as the home-visiting service, the family consultative centres, and for inclusive pre-school education. UNICEF Bulgaria will analyze budgets to suggestion how to fund the models using domestic resources. UNICEF Bulgaria will apply the global programme guidance on public finance for children, looking at adequacy, efficiency, effectiveness, equity and transparency of spending. There will be dialogue with partners to ensure the system's capacity to continue with interventions for refugee and migrant children, as the number of unaccompanied and separated children is increasing despite the overall trend of the total numbers of arrivals decreasing.

**Unfinished business:** Despite progress and results in the Child Care Reform that Bulgaria is sharing horizontally, there are still challenges related to availability and quality of services for children with disability and children in contact with the law. Some progress has been noted and documented with inclusive education of children with disabilities, but there is a need for comprehensive, coordinated and multisectoral efforts to ensure that no child is left behind, regardless of their abilities. As immediate steps, a national database on children with disabilities should be strengthened and new approaches for their participation and inclusion in society developed. Also, children in conflict with the law are still retained in closed facilities due to slow progress in the reform of the juvenile justice system and non-existence of alternative measures. UNICEF will advocate in 2019 for accelerating juvenile justice reform and development of alternatives for children in contact with the law.

### **Every child learns**

**Cross-sectoral cooperation:** One of the main challenges in improving the well-being of children continues to be the lack of cross-sectoral cooperation and coordination between child protection, social protection, education, health and justice sectors both at national and local level. In 2019, UNICEF Bulgaria will support the finalization of the National Strategy for the Child (2019 – 2030) and the National Early Childhood Development Strategy, strategic frameworks for cross-sectoral cooperation, and will continue to develop and improve the mechanisms for cooperation in areas such as prevention of school dropout, prevention and response to violence, prevention of child marriages, juvenile justice and social services

provision. The country already has a good model for cross-sectoral mechanism for prevention of the school dropout that can be used as an example.

### **Every child is protected from violence and exploitation**

**Prioritization and strategic focus:** The main lesson learned is the need to reduce the number of programmatic priorities to focus and maximize the effort to produce the systemic changes and highest impact on life of children in the country. An office compact must be introduced to ensure better synergy and further alignment of the programme, communication and fundraising outcomes. In 2019, the team will select prevention and response to violence against children as the UNICEF Bulgaria priority and integral part of the annual management plan, where further alignments and better synergy between the programme, communication and fundraising will be ensured.

**New partnerships for children:** A recent trend in public discourse on traditional values, where the traditional family narrative is used to oppose child rights and children's protection from violence and abuse, is demonstrating a need to look for new partnerships in order to combine efforts in promoting the child rights agenda. UNICEF will reflect on and strategize how to work with religious institutions. The office will explore opportunities for strategic communication on child rights, including audience research and message testing to support the INSPIRE package promotion and the Bulgarian Government to join the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children. The global communication and mobilization around the CRC@30 and specific focus on child well-being will develop new partnerships in the country.

**Harnessing the power of business and markets for children:** UNICEF will invite the private business in the country, creating solutions for children using two themes – violence against children and children with disabilities. UNICEF Bulgaria's campaign to prevent and address violence in schools is an opportunity to involve new partners and attract supporters.

### **Every child has an equitable chance in life**

**Data collection and data analysis:** A significant weakness in Bulgaria is lack of disaggregated data on children, particularly children with disabilities. UNICEF will strengthen effort and reach out to different partners to gather and analyze data on children. This is of utmost importance to ensure quality support in the evidence-based policy development and development of services for children.

**UNICEF's convener role and partnerships:** UNICEF Bulgaria will strengthen its role as convener of child-related meetings and catalyst of the legislative reform processes. UNICEF remains an important technical partner to the Government in assisting child-related policies and technical discussions, such as the national Strategy for the Child and Child Act. In the next phase of policy revision and development, UNICEF Bulgaria will focus on quality of the process and harmonization with all child-related revisions in the legislative framework. A stronger partnership in this process will be steered.

Enhance UNICEF skills in result-based planning and management: With the new staff and new partners, there is a need to strengthen planning and result-based management skills. UNICEF will prioritize this training in the first part of 2019 to ensure delivery of programme results.