

## North Macedonia

### Update on the context and situation of children

**Resolution of the decades-long dispute with Greece over the country's name marks a turning point in North Macedonia's history.** In 2018, the Governments of North Macedonia and Greece signed the Prespa Agreement aimed at resolving the prolonged name issue[1]. In January 2019, the parliament in Skopje endorsed the necessary constitutional changes introducing the new name of "Republic of North Macedonia". The use of the new name entered into force in February 2019 after ratification of the Prespa Agreement by the Greek parliament. In parallel, North Macedonia signed the NATO accession protocol, a process that had stalled for years due to the dispute. In April 2018, the European Commission recommended that the Council approve the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia. The resolution of the name is expected to accelerate the country's EU accession negotiations and promote its deeper integration into regional and global networks.

**Growth and fiscal measures continued to increase traditionally low employment rates.** According to World Bank data, between 2009 and 2018, the employment rate increased from 38.4 to 45.1 percent. This job creation was supported mainly by public spending for large-scale public projects, new active labour market policies, and government support for employment in special economic zones. Nevertheless, unemployment remains high at 20.7 percent and labour force participation is low, especially for those younger than 25 and older than 55 and for women. According to data from the ILO, the total youth unemployment rate (15-24) for 2019 was 45.3 percent[2]. The employment gender gap (women's employment rate is 18 percentage points lower than men's for 15-64-year olds) is driven by the gap in labour force participation. Women's labour participation rate (51 percent), is also 14 percentage points lower than the EU average. The gap persists throughout the life cycle and is higher than in most other Europe and Central Asia countries[3].

**New social protection reform aims to curb high child poverty rates.** According to data from the State Statistical Office, the general at-risk-of-poverty rate in 2018 was 21.9 percent, and for children 29.3 percent. Based on household income data from the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), North Macedonia is more unequal than its aspirational peers. Ethnic minorities are poorer than ethnic Macedonians[4]. Ethnic Albanian households constitute more than 40 percent of the poorest quintile, with disposable incomes only two-thirds of those of ethnic Macedonian peers. The Roma population is not only concentrated in the bottom 40 percent but is also far below ethnic Macedonians in labour market outcomes, human capital, and other nonmonetary poverty indicators. Poverty is higher in rural areas and there are important regional differences. According to SILC data, in both the North-eastern and Polog regions, poverty was close to 40 percent compared to a national rate of 22 percent, and poverty in the remaining regions has fallen to 10-14 percent. In 2018 and 2019, the Government embarked on a comprehensive reform of its social protection and welfare systems aiming to curb high child poverty rates and lift households out of poverty through employment and support services.

**The inclusion of persons with disabilities was reinvigorated.** In 2019, the government delivered on its pledge to end the institutional placement of all children. In line with this commitment, there are no more children under the age of 18 in institutional placement in North Macedonia. Former institutions are now being transformed into resources centres and community support services. In 2019, Parliament adopted legislation to further contribute to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education and the Government is taking action towards national scale-up of UNICEF-supported functional disability assessment based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF).

**Enrolment in preschool among children aged 3 to 6 remains low compared to neighbouring countries.** With only about 30 percent of children attending preschool in the 2018/19 school year[5], enrolment still falls far short of the EU Education and Training 2020 target of 95 percent. However, the government has taken measures to increase resources and preschool places by investing in infrastructure and high-quality teacher training. These reforms should help address existing variations in children's basic competencies when they enter primary school, which partly reflects low participation in pre-primary institutions.

**Children with disabilities and those from Roma communities continue to face barriers to education.** Despite high general completion rates in primary, lower and upper secondary education, an estimated [6] 10 percent of children from

## Macedonia

Roma communities do not regularly attend primary school. Roma girls have the lowest school attendance rates and may marry early. For example, 46 percent of Roma girls complete secondary education, compared to 78 percent for non-Roma girls[7]. New legislation on primary education adopted in 2019, however, foresees that children with disabilities will be enrolled in regular primary schools and that all migrant children, regardless of migration status, will be able to access primary schooling. In addition the legislation aims to improve school management and introduces a merit-based career advancement system for teachers. Recent results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show significant improvements in learning outcomes in reading, mathematics and science, however overall student performance remains significantly below the OECD average.

**A rising infant mortality rate was reversed in 2018 with 5.7 deaths per 1,000 live births, down from 11.9 in 2017.**[8] Nevertheless, North Macedonia is the only country among its peers where public health spending as a share of GDP has consistently decreased over the past 15 years[9], and child related health expenditure decreased from 0.68 percent of GDP in 2010 to 0.63 percent in 2017[10]. The health status of the Roma population is worse than the general population with significantly shorter life expectancy. As result of the decrease in immunization coverage, specifically measles first dose (from 83% in 2017 to 75% in 2018), there were 1902 measles cases in 2019, which placed North Macedonia among 15 countries with the highest rate of measles globally. [11]

**North Macedonia is prone to earthquakes, flooding, mudslides, landslides, droughts and storms.** Heatwaves have been on the rise and extreme events are predicted to become more intense. Although average rainfall is likely to decrease, according to a recent UNICEF Climate Landscape Analysis, destructive rainfall events may become more extreme. Air pollution, due mainly to wood burning, traffic and industry, is at dangerously high levels in populated and industrial areas across the country, with lack of financial resources an obstacle to putting air quality improvement measures in place. Other environmental concerns include untreated mining, municipal and industrial waste entering water systems, potentially affecting drinking water. Children living in Roma settlements may be at particular risk from untreated water and lack of waste management[12]. The Office maintains a multi-hazard preparedness plan in the Emergency Preparedness Platform, which aims to address possible humanitarian consequences for children and their families, such as a major earthquake in a densely populated urban setting.

**Through 2015 and 2016, the country faced an unprecedented wave of migrants and refugees entering its southern border with Greece.** Borders were closed in early 2016, as they were in neighbouring countries. However, the movement continued, relying on illegal smuggling networks. In the period between January and the end of November 2019, authorities registered a total of 1,525 migrants on the territory of the country – 51 percent less than the 3,132 reported in 2018. However, based on field observations, it is estimated that the number of crossings to the country from Greece and from the country to Serbia is higher than the officially reported. Most migrants avoid registration, making actual numbers difficult to calculate. Migrants from Afghanistan (30 percent) were the most frequent of those registered by authorities, followed by Pakistan (24 percent), Bangladesh (7 percent), Iran (7 percent), Syria (7 percent) and 25 percent of other nationalities. According to available data, the total number of accommodated migrants and refugees in North Macedonia ranged from a minimum of 37 reported in January to a maximum of 146 reported in July[13].

[1] The country became a member of the United Nations in 1993, but because of a dispute with Greece over the use of the name Macedonia, it was admitted under the provisional description of "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia."

[2] Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database. Data retrieved in December 2019

[3] CPF for the Republic of North Macedonia, World Bank 2019

[4] SSO, 2017 Survey on Quality of Life

[5] North Macedonia 2019 Report European Commission

[6] North Macedonia 2019 Report European Commission

[7] USAID 2019

## Macedonia

[8] [Statistical Yearbook](#). In addition, the Institute for Public Health calculates and publishes the rates for Neonatal and Perinatal Mortality. The latest figures from 2017: Perinatal Mortality Rate is 14.8; Neonatal Mortality Rate is 7.5.

[9] World Bank North Macedonia Public Finance Review: Sowing the Seeds of a Sustainable Future

[10] Finance Think Policy Brief 31

[11] source: [http://apps.who.int/immunization\\_monitoring/globalsummary/countries?countrycriteria%5Bcountry%5D%5B%5D=MKD](http://apps.who.int/immunization_monitoring/globalsummary/countries?countrycriteria%5Bcountry%5D%5B%5D=MKD);  
[https://www.who.int/immunization/monitoring\\_surveillance/burden/vpd/surveillance\\_type/active/Global\\_MR\\_Update\\_December\\_2019](https://www.who.int/immunization/monitoring_surveillance/burden/vpd/surveillance_type/active/Global_MR_Update_December_2019).

[12] An Analysis of the Situation of Women and Children in North Macedonia, 2019, UNICEF

[13] Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean, November 2019, DTM IOM

### Major contributions and drivers of results

In the year which marked the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF in North Macedonia has seen huge programmatic successes for just those rights, working with partners in a context of rapid reform to realise significant results for children. There has been landmark progress in the development of new legislation, effectively changing the context in which children in North Macedonia will grow and develop, accompanied by high level commitment for reforms which support child rights and development. UNICEF has been able to capitalise on this momentum, accelerating action in education, early childhood development, de-institutionalisation of children, awareness and prevention of violence, and establishment of policy frameworks which will allow for more effective child and social protection and development well into the future.

UNICEF continues to work with sectoral line ministries towards key agreed results, as described in the paragraphs below. Increasingly, however, UNICEF has succeeded in promoting a new cross-sectorality, not just in its own interventions, but among key line Ministries, for more robust results. On-going and open collaboration among Ministries of Health, Education and Labour and Social Policy – UNICEF’s principal counterpart Ministries – has been notable. This was fostered mid-year through an innovative study tour, in which all three of these Ministers, their chiefs of cabinet and several UNICEF staff went to the UK, to learn more about early childhood development and the prevention of adverse childhood experiences. Perhaps two of the most moving examples of resulting inter-ministerial commitment and collaboration were seen two key conferences: in October 2019, UNICEF, the World Bank and the Government of North Macedonia organized a Regional Conference on Responsive Social Protection Solutions that brought together academics, researchers, practitioners, decision makers and activists to jointly discuss obstacles and solutions for responsive social protection support. Then in November, UNICEF hosted a sub-regional conference on prevention of violence against children. In the closure of the latter, five Ministers – of Education and Science, Health, Labour and Social Policy, Justice and Interior – publicly signed a pledge to eradicate violence against children. This collaboration has reinforced strong results at the sectoral level, across all areas of UNICEF programming, in line with the Strategic Plan.

Annual Management Plan priorities centred around key programme areas of disability inclusion, early childhood development, reform of the childcare system, prevention of violence and adolescent development. There was also an acknowledgement of the importance of UNICEF’s advocacy efforts being echoed through partners, with the need to strengthen their capacity in social media and messaging. Preliminary efforts were made to map partner’s social media and advocacy capacities, and work will continue in this area in 2020. The office also committed to on-going efficiency and greening in UNICEF’s operations, which were pursued through key investments in energy savings, and the construction of a disability toilet for visitors and staff within the UNICEF premises. All of these planned results have been achieved, with key milestones in childcare system reform, and inclusive education.

While UNICEF and partners are increasingly building cross- sectoral linkages for child development, progress has also been made in key thematic areas. In **health and nutrition**, UNICEF has leveraged UN and Government partnerships to continue in health system reform, particularly focused on improving perinatal and maternal mortality. *Working collaboratively with UN sister agencies* including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Population

## Macedonia

Fund (UNFPA), UNICEF assisted the Government in assessing the causes of infant mortality and promoted specific action in perinatal mortality, building on a joint action plan developed in 2018. While by latest figures, mortality rates have reduced moderately after spiking in 2017, there remain system level constraints to further improving neonatal and maternal survival. UNICEF's role in this includes mapping of health institutions and their resources, developing standards for maternity wards, establishing a system for regular perinatal and maternal mortality audits and developing transportation guidelines for new-borns and mothers. Significantly, UNICEF developed a comprehensive methodology for auditing, documenting and addressing root causes of child deaths, delivered training for a newly formed national task force and aided in the establishment of the national audit body and national new-born transportation unit. This is a critical piece of health reform and must be established in a sustainable way, including budget allocations to address maintenance and replacement along with adequate training and supervision.

Another concern has been the capacity of health professionals to pro-actively identify and address developmental problems affecting children. UNICEF supports training of health professionals working at primary health care services (home visiting nurses, general practitioners and family medicine specialists), aimed to improve their knowledge and skills on early detection, intervention and support for children with disabilities and their families. This work is supported by an on-going, multi-year communication for social change strategy to promote public awareness and commitment for greater inclusion of children with disabilities. Having reached full coverage of the patronage workforce with training on early detection of children with disabilities, capacity development has continued with modules on early intervention and support to families, and on-going training has been enriched with a module on early attachment, recognizing mothers at risk of child abandonment, neglect and/or abuse and positive parenting and nurturing caregiving. The 2019 regional evaluation on Home Visiting[1], in which North Macedonia was a case study country, will serve to further build on the breadth and sustainability of capacity development for home visitors and on the impact of their work.

This foundation for child development is further strengthened as children enter into **early education** – the moment where children are opened to a new world of opportunities for learning and growth. UNICEF and the World Bank have advocated for and are now supporting a policy to increase pre-school coverage by 50% by 2024. Only 30% of children between 3 and 6 currently go to pre-school, largely from the wealthiest two quintiles who reside almost exclusively in urban areas. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has committed to expand the early childhood education infrastructure by building new kindergartens and repurposing public buildings for early education centres. This will create approximately 7500 new preschool spaces in both urban and rural areas.

In addition to expanding access, it is vital to improve quality. Social and emotional development of children is now recognised as one of the strongest influences on personal development and life achievement for individuals and a pre-requisite for effective cognitive learning. UNICEF has been working with a group of selected pre-school teachers to pilot a programme of socio-emotional development and learning, which will be rolled out through an innovative mentoring programme to all pre-schools in the country. This work focuses on building essential values in children in their earliest learning years such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships and responsible decision making, which will serve as a foundation for cohesion later in life. The 35 high-performing pre-school teachers have been supported to take on additional leadership responsibilities by becoming national teacher leaders ('Peer Support Teachers') with tailored mentoring and peer support. As they grow in their competency they will support an additional 107 pre-school teachers in 30 kindergartens to develop these same skills.

Further support is being given through the development of an innovative, national web-based ECD platform that will assist improvement of the quality of teaching and learning through **co-creation and innovation**, involving teachers, parents and children. The platform will hold existing and newly created resources in a one stop shop open to both parents and teachers, allowing them to access and use multiple tools and approaches to cover the whole spectrum of child learning and development in pre-school and primary school. The platform will provide an environment to support improvements in the quality of teaching and learning, to increase socio-emotional development in pre-primary education and to facilitate the implementation of play-based learning and character/virtue-based education. Teachers will be able to access on-going mentoring materials and have the option to submit their own creative game or learning activity ideas to the web-platform.

Reform of **primary education** has been a key focus in 2019, with the passage of two new laws – the Law on Teachers and

## Macedonia

Support Staff and the Law on Primary Education, passed in July of this year and brought into implementation with the start of a new school year in September. Both were built on the evidence and analysis of the 2018 UNICEF OECD *Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Education* study, ostensibly around assessment methods, but leveraged to engage key stakeholders in high level debate around the need for holistic education reform. The new laws set forth a basis for support to and motivation of teachers with the introduction of a merit-based career advancement system, and bolster the use of evidence in decision-making by introducing coherent national standards for students in primary school and setting up a new model for a national assessment that will provide essential information for system evaluation. They also set the legal basis and supporting systems for inclusion of all students with disabilities and other children who have been excluded from education until now, including all migrant children, regardless of their migration status, into the mainstream primary education system.

UNICEF has partnered with the government's Innovation Fund and the start-up community to deliver the Upshift programme and the Generation Unlimited Youth Challenge, aimed to stimulate and develop participation, social innovation and entrepreneurial skills amongst adolescents and youth and to provide them with a platform for meaningful participation. These programmes aim to equip young people with 21st century and employability skills and help them create entrepreneurial solutions to the barriers that they, and their communities, face. They provide participants with support in learning crucial skills such as critical thinking, communication, team-work, entrepreneurship and project management and a venue for tackling socially responsible topics affecting their everyday lives. Both UPSHIFT and the Generation Unlimited youth challenge actively reach out to disadvantaged youth as beneficiaries and participants, with particular support from an established network of youth NGOs that works with marginalized groups of young people, and supported the process of UPSHIFT promotion. Ultimately these workshops have led to several startups and gainful employment for the students – important in a context of high youth unemployment. Over 100 young people have gone through cycles of Upshift, creating ideas for community services which are now being rolled out across the country.

Winners from the first cycle of the Generation Unlimited Youth Challenge were selected as one of the five winning global teams to carry their idea – for an anti-bullying app – forward to an even wider scale through mentorship and seed funding and are influencing other young people with their ideas. In order to build sustainability into this work, UNICEF and the Innovation Fund are also partnering with the Ministry of Education and Science's Bureau for Development of Education aiming to incorporate UpShift techniques, methods and approaches into the regular education curriculum, to eventually reach all students in the country.

In **Child Protection** a key imperative has been to ensure that every child has a family. Reforms in the child protection sector have led to significant improvements in 2019, particularly in de-institutionalization. Since August 2017 the number of children in institutions dropped from 180 to only 2 by December 2019, with no children under age 3 in institutions and the ending of placement of children under three in large scale institutions since the end of September. All children remaining in large-scale institutions in the country are expected to leave them by January 2020, a full year before the deadline of the Government's official commitment to end institutional care for children under 18 by the end of 2020. De-institutionalised children have been either reunited with their families, are living with foster families, have been adopted or are residing in small group homes that replicate family life, supported by community-based alternative care services. Some of these newly developed services are to be housed in former institutions – completing the circle of transformation and ensuring that the spaces are well utilised as long term, sustainable community care hubs. The Foster care system is being further strengthened by revision of the standards and training materials, and introduction of support centres for foster carers.

UNICEF has also worked with partners to keep families together, through strengthening of family focused community support and enhancement of parenting education. Introduction of a gatekeeping mechanism which will prevent the social system from easily removing children from their families is being supported to prevent unnecessary separation. An effective gatekeeping mechanism ensures that policies, procedures and services are in place to restrict the flow of children into institutions and contribute to their onward progression back to families or substitute families, and actions are to prevent child separation from the family and community. Public opinion is also being engaged to further promote the strengthening of families as safe and positive spaces for child development. A nationwide campaign on #ParentingIsAlsoLearned was launched to promote positive parenting and prevention of adverse childhood experiences, including violence against children, through digital platforms, mainstream media and – for the first time in the country's history – through public discussions on parenting and violence against children in communities. Preparations for the establishment of a National

## Macedonia

Helpline to support parents in their child-rearing responsibilities by using positive parenting methods have also commenced with training of candidates/operators on the helpline and negotiating free-of-charge telephone line with the largest telecom company in the country.

A UNICEF-supported sub-regional conference on prevention of violence against children, held in November 2019, rallied professionals and the wider public to greater awareness and commitment for violence prevention, culminating in an inter-ministerial pledge to eradicate violence against children. Despite these efforts, violence remains pervasive. According to a 2019 mid-point Follow-up Survey on Parents' and Caregivers' Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices & Social Norms Associated with Violence Against Children (VAC KAP & Social Norms Survey, 2019), 70 percent of parents believe that a parent has the right to discipline their child in any way they believe is right, even hit them in certain circumstances and a large portion of interviewed parents (57% in 2019 as opposed to only 45% in the original survey in 2016) believe that no one has the right to tell a parent how to raise their child. The #ParentingIsAlsoLearned campaign has had appreciable impact, however. For example, parents/caregivers exposed to campaign are less likely to believe physical (33%) and psychological punishment (17%) are effective ways to correct a child's behaviour than their peers who have not seen or heard the campaign (42% and 29%, respectively); are less likely (60%) to agree that a parent has the right to discipline their child in any way they believe is right, compared to those who haven't (73%); are more likely (47%) to believe that is not justified to hit a child compared to those who haven't (30%); and are twice as likely (48%) to believe parenting is something that is learned compared to those who haven't (23%).

At a coordination level, UNICEF has supported the National Body for Protection of Children from Abuse and Neglect to strengthen the monitoring of the situation of children victims of violence and ensure evidence-based policy development. The forms of violence clearly defined and addressed with the National Strategy include: gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as prevention of early, arranged and forced marriages. This will be reinforced through the 2019 development of a National Strategy to End Violence against Children (2020 – 2025).

In support of children in conflict or affected by the law, considerable investment in juvenile justice reform has been made. The Justice for Children Law is being revised to ensure adherence to the principle of the best interest of the child, harmonisation with the newly adopted EU Directives concerning procedural guarantees for the protection of children suspected or accused in criminal proceedings, strengthening of the protection of child victims of crime, and access to legal counsel and representation which also regulates the measures for protection of child victims and witnesses.<sup>[2]</sup> UNICEF works closely with the Agency for Execution of Sanctions to ensure statutory education and improved health access is enabled for children in correctional facilities, as well as rehabilitation and resocialisation programmes tailored to their needs. However, diversionary (keeping children out of the justice system) and alternative (keeping children out of custody) models need to be further developed.

The 2019 **social protection** reform and launch of the new Law on Social Protection, developed with direct UNICEF support, is expected to help significantly reduce poverty. The government replaced the fragmented system of social benefits with a more unified Guaranteed Minimum Allowance, for which the benefit is higher, and more people are eligible, resulting in a significant increase of the number of children benefiting from social transfers. For example, the number of children benefiting from child allowances increased from approximately 3,500 in 2018 to 27,156 in 2019 and some 4,128 children started benefiting from a new educational allowance in 2019. Additionally, a wide array of new and improved social support and care services (such as personal assistants for children with disabilities, respite care, assisted living, foster care, counselling, for example) were introduced in the communities where children in need live. The government has also increased amounts and coverage of the child and educational allowances; introduced means-testing for the parental allowance, which should reduce inclusion of medium- and high-income families; and introduced a social safety net for those older than 65.

The introduction of case management in Centres for Social Work (CSW) and other institutions is considered a major prerequisite for the success of the ongoing social protection and social welfare system reform. With support from UNICEF, the Government has introduced protocols and manuals for professional on case management, adjusted the terms of reference for social workers in CSWs to better reflect the use of case management in practice, and delivered advanced case management training to all social welfare professionals in the country. A new Management Information System is also

## Macedonia

---

under development and will be rolled out in 2020.

UNICEF has supported the piloting of a new human rights-based model of disability assessment, based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). The globally accepted ICF provides a holistic model for assessing children's potential, and – through this new pilot model – linking children and their families to the services that will allow them to flourish. Two pilot centres for disability assessment and support services have been set-up in Skopje and the experiences used through the process will be used by the three key ministries (Education, Health and Labour and Social Policy) to scale-up the assessment model nationally. Through the ICF centres, parents work in partnership with a multi-disciplinary team in a family friendly space to jointly plan a future in which the child can thrive.

Underpinning all of this work is a need for evidence. During 2019, work in **child rights monitoring** has centred on supporting the State Statistical Office in the implementation of the sixth round of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS6). The survey will generate vast data in areas that are key to children's wellbeing and on topics for which available information is scarce. As such, it will play a vital role in addressing data gaps in the country, including gaps in age and sex disaggregation, and serve as valuable input for data-driven reforms. Recent analysis in the 2019 Situation Analysis (*An analysis of the situation of women and children in the Republic of North Macedonia 2019*) will also contribute to data and evidence driven advocacy for reform.

Through all, UNICEF has embedded change strategies – leveraging partnerships with the UN, the World Bank and with key Ministries, and strategically building public consensus around change for children through advocacy and public engagement. Systems strengthening remains a key priority – both at the policy level, as well as in the capacities and the motivation of public sector employees. The 2018 Behaviour Insights analysis which highlighted significant de-motivation and over-burden of teachers and social workers has figured prominently in UNICEF's thinking and planning through 2019, setting a foundation for focused capacity development centred on the realisation that no level of capacity building can have adequate impact in a context of de-motivation. On-going work in this area will centre in planning for 2020.

[\[1\]](#) Multi-Country Evaluation of the Universal Progressive Home Visiting for Young Children Well-being and Development in the Europe and Central Asia Region (ECAR) in the period of 2014-2018

[\[2\]](#) In the current version of the Criminal Code, violence against children includes: domestic violence, child pornography, psychological violence, online violence, peer violence, as well as child stalking and surveillance. Sexual violence, and hate crime on account of race, skin color, nationality, ethnic origin, religion or belief, mental or physical disability, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and political belief, are also regulated. The Justice for children law includes prevention and is currently under revision.

## Macedonia

### Lessons Learned and Innovations

UNICEF has contributed to the realisation of powerful results for children in North Macedonia in 2019. Landmark successes have been seen in social protection, in education reform, in early childhood development and in the movement of public opinion toward building positive and violence free families and communities. This has only been possible, however, because of a wider momentum for change, with reform-minded Government and highest-level commitments for action. The lesson for UNICEF in this is the need to be deeply aware of its context, and agile, ready to act and build on wider opportunities for change. With decisive and timely action, UNICEF's work can catalyse a wider breadth of consensus.

Though 2019, UNICEF has leveraged evidence for action to overcome potential barriers to this on-going change. In the Education sector, UNICEF was able to use the UNICEF-OECD 2018 analysis *Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Education* which ostensibly centred only on educational assessment to bring wider dialogue and reform of the education system as a whole. When faced with potential derailing of the new Social Protection reforms providing cash benefits to all children in need, UNICEF worked with the World Bank to leverage convincing evidence to bring opponents on board, paving the way for approval of the new law. In the process of de-institutionalisation, a commitment of the current administration, UNICEF was similarly able to act immediately in support of the Government, embedding technical assistance within the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy to support rapid planning and change, and building depth of action across community services to make the rapid reforms potentially more sustainable. These instances are examples where UNICEF, tuned to the immediate context and potential, can leverage its particular comparative advantage and credibility to build on child rights momentum for wider change.

Despite this success, the dramatic progress seen in 2019 will only be truly positive if it is continued. UNICEF now faces the need to build long term capacity, institutional reform and sustainability to ensure that momentum, collaboration and commitment to change for children continues.

This will require on-going political will, and long-term systems change – development of mechanisms and capacities that will continue to grow and allow reforms to be embedded. It will also require social change – real and renewed commitment for action. Public opinion is fragile. Despite many voices in favour of change, there have been examples of resistance to child centred reforms through 2019 – public complaints when de-institutionalised children have been re-housed in communities, and on-going opposition to vaccination and to inclusive classroom.

These risks are heightened in the climate of on-going political change in the country. The failure to gain an EU accession date as expected in October has strengthened voices of criticism to the reforms earlier in the year, and the early elections called after that disappointment mean the very real danger that reforms may be overhauled in 2020. UNICEF must work with partners in a strategic manner at this fragile and crucial juncture to ensure that progress for children is not reversed, but rather strengthened well into the future.