

Serbia

Part 1: Situation update in the country

The year under review was the third year of implementation of the programme of cooperation 2016–2020. The context within which progress for children is made under this programme remains promising overall, yet still challenging. With a continued focus by the Serbian Government on economic reforms and investment in more sustained economic growth, UNICEF Serbia has maintained its advocacy for the inclusion of social development – especially for the most vulnerable children and young people – in the new economic vision, as an essential element of sustainability. UNICEF's solid engagement with multiple actors helped to preserve investment in policy reforms and systems-strengthening, and work has continued with the new Government to build on previous results.

Demographic trends are negative: the population is rapidly declining and ageing, shrinking by around 0.5 per cent per year. Children represent 17 per cent of the population and this proportion keeps declining, while the Government is prioritizing stronger pro-childbirth measures and investment in children and young people.

In the area of social inclusion and protection, 7.2 per cent of the population and 9.5 per cent of children (compared to 8.4 per cent in 2016) were considered to live in absolute poverty: approximately 115,000 children. The at-risk-of-poverty rate is 25.7 per cent: 30.5 per cent for children aged 0–17 years, compared to 30.2 per cent in 2016, and 29.7 per cent of youth aged 18–24 years), compared to 32.7 per cent in 2016.

A law on financial support for families with children was adopted in 2018; but amendments to the social welfare law and family law are still pending. Recent data indicate that some 3.7 per cent of the population benefited from financial social assistance. These data point to the need to increase coverage and adequacy of cash benefits to provide for essential needs. The total number of social welfare system beneficiaries has continued to grow, reaching 735,330, which is 1.5 per cent more than in 2016 and 11 per cent more than in 2013. The total number of children benefiting from the social welfare system has also increased, although their share within the total number of beneficiaries remains the same: 27 per cent. At the same time, the total number of professional workers in centres for social work has continued to decline due to a cap on public employment of 1,723 –7.5 per cent lower than 2016 and 16 per cent lower than 2013.

In the area of education and training, enrolment and achievement rates in pre-university education are consistently high. However, participation by children younger than six in early childhood education (ECE) remains low; and has been prioritized by the Government. The education system also faces a number of structural challenges. Public spending on education as a percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP) is comparable to that of European Union (EU) countries, but outcomes in terms of skills and key competencies are weaker. The quality,

equity and relevance of education and training have to be improved to better match societal needs. About one in five in the age group 15–24 (particularly women) are not employed, in school or receiving training, despite some improvements, pointing to a considerable gap between acquired skills and labour market demand. Employers and graduates agree that the country's educational institutions do not equip students with key soft-skills, such as problem-solving and decision-making. National strategic documents and recently adopted legislation aim to address the outdated curricula and teaching methods in pre-university education; however, implementation has yet to begin. A law on the national qualifications framework was adopted, and should now be linked with a progressive reform of the education system at all levels, including non-formal and informal learning.

Some 31,138 cases of family violence were reported in 2017 (25 per cent more than in 2016). When children were reported as direct victims of family violence (8,407, or 27 per cent of the total number) the most prevalent form of violence was neglect (37 per cent), followed by physical (30 per cent) and emotional violence (30 per cent). New children entering care due to child/family separation remained high in 2017 (1,093; 27 children more than in 2016). Although most of the children are placed into kinship or foster-care families, of particular concern is that 23.7 per cent of new entries are children aged 0–3. While the ratio of children with disabilities in institutional care dropped slightly in 2017 (to 70 per cent), year-end data on children 0–3 shows a sharp increase – from 26 in 2016 to 40 in 2017.

Serbia's infant mortality rate was 4.7 deaths per 1,000 live births, while the neonatal mortality rate was 3.21. The worst situation in terms of children's health indicators in Serbia was for perinatal mortality, which was 7.8.

While substantial progress on improving children's health status was made in Serbia in recent decades, mortality among Roma children is still twice the national average. One of four children aged 6–23 months in the general population do not have a sufficiently diverse diet, while this is the case for two of every three Roma children. As many as 10 per cent of children living in Roma settlements are underweight, 19 per cent are stunted and only 13 per cent are fully vaccinated. In addition, breastfeeding rates in Serbia are very low – with exclusive breastfeeding at only 13 per cent. This places children at risk of long-term cognitive deficits, emotional and behavioural issues, low school achievement and lower productivity in adulthood.

Serbia faced a measles outbreak, along with many other countries. Based on official data for 2017, some 85.2 per cent of children were vaccinated against measles, while 95.1 per cent were vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis. According to the findings of the recently conducted knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) study on immunization – initiated to define an effective response to the recorded decline in immunization coverage (particularly for measles, mumps and rubella) – 92 per cent of parents claimed that they had vaccinated their children according to the schedule; however, only 79 per cent claimed they would do so in the future, leaving 18 per cent of parents hesitant to immunize (not sure, or would select vaccines) and 1 per cent refusing to vaccinate.

Qualitative research on parenting practices in the early years found that parents stimulate child development by relying on their intuition, not knowing how to meet the child's cognitive and emotional needs, and do not use play and interaction in an educational manner. Almost 30 per cent of children under five, and up to 56 per cent of children from the poorest families, have fewer than three children's books at home. Almost one in 10 children lack stimulation through play at home in their second and third years of life. Engagement of fathers is low; only 36.5 per

cent of children aged 3–5 years benefit from such engagement. Development scores based on early childhood development (ECD) components of the multiple indicator cluster survey (MICS) indicate that development of children from the poorest quintiles is lagging behind those from the richest by as much as eight months. To respond to the above-mentioned challenges, UNICEF Serbia continued to advocate and provide strong technical support to the development of national policies and strategies in sectors relevant to children: education, early childhood development, child protection and social protection. UNICEF's work in 2018 focused strongly on the youngest children, universal access to early childhood services and interventions, preschool, improving the skills of parents of young children, and ensuring that all children can grow up in a supportive family environment.

Since the beginning of the migrant and refugee influx, UNICEF Serbia responded to the unique needs of children and women seeking asylum in Europe, on the move, stranded or pushed back. The complex political situation in Europe, the lack of effective information-sharing systems for refugees and migrants, as well as physical barriers between countries, have left refugee and migrant children and their families facing great uncertainty. The steady increase in the number of refugees and migrants (although at a reduced rate) and their prolonged period of stay created additional demand for child-centred services. The number of stranded refugees and migrants in Serbia throughout 2018 fluctuated at around 4,000, while around 14,000 new arrivals were recorded (based on United Nations High Commission on Refugees sources), of which around 30 per cent are children.

While EU accession is currently the most important strategic objective for Serbia, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has also gained prominence. The renewed focus on the 'social dimension' of the EU Western Balkans strategy and the Sofia Declaration provide a unique window of opportunity to advance children's rights by leveraging the EU accession process in conjunction with the Agenda 2030. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) localization process served as an opportunity to bring together the two key drivers for reform: EU accession and SDG achievement. Nonetheless, more needs to be done to accelerate action to achieving sustainable change and clear prioritization is required to focus on its main drivers. During 2018 the Government remained strongly committed to the implementation and advancing of Agenda 2030. A set of SDG-related activities was initiated in mid-2017 and continued at a strong pace throughout 2018. The overarching objective, and an area where important progress was made during this year, was the identification of linkages and complementarities between EU accession – as the process that underpins all reforms and development activities in the country – and Agenda 2030. Through evidence-based research, analysis and discussions, accelerators are being identified and mapped to enable mutual reinforcement of these two processes.

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

Goal area 1: Every child survives and thrives

Under the leadership of the Ministry of Health (MoH), UNICEF has supported national efforts to increase the focus on the most marginalized children (children with disabilities and Roma children) who are not benefiting from full access to health services. While these marginalized groups remain a key programmatic focus, the urgency of action prioritized by the Government because of decreasing immunization rates and the comparatively high rate of perinatal

mortality, led UNICEF to broaden its health programming and universalize its focus. With compelling evidence on how the earliest years of a child's life are critical to cognitive and overall development, UNICEF worked closely with partners to shift more attention to the 0–3 age group.

A call to action on early childhood development co-signed by the Ministries of Health, Education, Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs, as well as the Chair of the Council for Child Rights, represents an important landmark toward accelerated expansion of ECD support and services.

Building on evidence generated through situation analyses focusing on patronage nurses, developmental counselling units and early childhood interventions (ECI), policy recommendations to improve the reach and quality of services were developed, paving the way for a sustainable model of accessible, adequate community and outreach services. In partnership with the MoH, ECD guidelines and models were developed and are being operationalized to improve equity and quality – in policy and practice. While there is potential to scale-up nationwide, constraints include a shortage of ECD technical capacity, combined with lack of funding. Further advocacy, technical support to Government and fundraising to support further scale-up will continue to be prioritized in 2019.

Under the leadership of the Ministry of Health, important progress was achieved in strengthening health professionals' capacity to further improve parents' knowledge and skills on ECD, and early detection, intervention and support for children with disabilities and their families. As a result, 15 new primary health care centres were prepared (a total 25 out of 158), and almost 6,200 new young children and over 10,300 parents benefited from improved ECD services, including 800 children with developmental risks or difficulties.

From an early age, children with disabilities face numerous barriers to inclusion. Early detection and intervention services are limited in scope and coverage. Following the recommendations from the ECI situation analysis, capacity building for piloting of an ECI model developed by international and national experts got underway in two municipalities. The newly developed national guideline for screening, diagnostics and early intervention for children with autism and the implementation of the WHO programme for parents of children with developmental difficulties will also support quality ECI provision. To support advocacy efforts and broaden partnerships in and out of the country, good practices from Portugal were presented at a national ECI conference. UNICEF is currently supporting joint efforts by the health, education and social welfare sectors to model ECI at a decentralized level.

To further accelerate results, emphasis was placed on strengthening pre-service training for the health workforce: the medical school in Belgrade integrated developmental paediatrics into both the paediatric syllabus and paediatric specialization, complementing the existing ECD elective course.

To address the bottleneck of limited parenting knowledge, UNICEF, in partnership with Nordeus, facilitated development of the 'hello baby' mobile application. This public–private partnership to accelerate results for children will help parents find up-to-date information and advice on their child's development, nutrition and care. From an equity perspective, data show that Roma children suffer from a lower health status than children in the general population. Under the leadership of the MoH, Roma health mediators continue to be critical human resources for reaching out to this vulnerable group. Although different options to ensure

sustainability of this service were shared with the Government, institutionalization was still pending at end-2018. Capacity of the recently created Association of Roma Health Mediators was being strengthened to further support this process. To complement the efforts of the MoH, UNICEF is partnering with Roma CSOs to implement outreach programmes to improve outcomes for Roma children. Monitoring of interventions highlights that such programmes will require longer-term investment from UNICEF and partners to change behaviours, as well as an increased focus on social and behaviour change.

To support national efforts to address a measles outbreak, UNICEF stepped up advocacy and capacity development efforts for increased immunization coverage. Under the leadership of the MoH, UNICEF and WHO provided technical support to respond to the measles outbreak and identify bottlenecks. In response to concerns regarding MoH prioritization of immunization coverage, UNICEF supported the development of a communication/C4D preparedness and response plan. Findings from the knowledge, attitudes and practices study on immunization were used to develop an interpersonal communication training package, delivered to over 150 frontline health workers, in cooperation with Johns Hopkins University. In addition, support to the process for improving the country's vaccine procurement system was initiated by providing opportunities for key stakeholders to participate in the vaccine procurement practitioners exchange forum in Copenhagen. Providing support to the MoH for measles outbreak response and development of a new national programme on immunization will remain a priority in 2019—particularly in the areas of strengthening vaccine procurement processes and supporting social- and behaviour-change communication activities.

Steady progress was made in reducing neonatal, infant and under-five mortality rates. However, against this backdrop of overall improvement was a worrisome lack of progress in reducing perinatal mortality rates, with large disparities at the regional level. To overcome this bottleneck, prioritized by the MoH, UNICEF supported strengthening the capacity of health professionals on family-oriented developmental care and promotion of breastfeeding in 12 neonatal intensive care units (23 per cent of total) and maternities. To complement these efforts, equipment for implementing evidence-based baby/mother-friendly and developmental care practices (such as breastfeeding support, early skin-to-skin contact and kangaroo mother care) was made available to seven neonatal intensive care units. Further scaling-up will be a priority.

Accreditation standards for maternity and neonatal units (in line with international baby and mother-friendly standards) offer a vital means for continuous improvement and quality assurance of maternity and neonatal care across the country. To support these national efforts, UNICEF continued to strengthen the capacity of hospitals for their application. Almost 100 per cent of maternity and neonatal units were sensitized about key accreditation criteria, and as of 2018, 8 per cent of maternities were accredited and 21 per cent of hospitals were working toward accreditation. Strengthening the capacity of the agency charged with accreditation of health care institutions to monitor implementation of the new national standards for maternity and neonatal units will remain a priority, to ensure the quality of services.

To accelerate results, policy and research need to be further strengthened to identify and address causes of high perinatal and neonatal mortality rates and regional disparities, in support of Government priorities.

To drive up breastfeeding rates nationally, in 2018 the MoH appointed a national breastfeeding coordinator and adopted a national programme to support breastfeeding and family-oriented

developmental care. UNICEF supported the development of recommendations to align national legislation with the International Code for Marketing Breastmilk Substitutes and further capacity-strengthening efforts. Following a pilot phase, the introduction of breastfeeding indicators in routine medical evidence is expected in 2019.

Parents have a key role to play in efforts to improve the quality of maternity and neonatal care in Serbia, particularly in promoting acceptance of modern breastfeeding and nurturing practices. To that end, UNICEF supported the development and distribution of breastfeeding promotion materials to all maternities and primary health centres throughout the country. This will contribute to building public support for parenting groups and broadening parental participation in advocacy for better quality maternity and neonatal care.

In 2019, priority will be given to development of regulatory mechanisms, further capacity strengthening and promotion of exclusive breastfeeding that would ensure sustainable changes within the health system and in the community. Stronger enforcement of the Code also remains crucial in order to improve breastfeeding rates.

UNICEF continued to play a lead role with the MoH, the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM) and CSOs in providing support for infant and young child feeding (IYCF) to refugee and migrant children and their mothers. Following intensive advocacy and technical support, UNICEF successfully handed over infant food distribution to the Food Consortium. With an eye to systems strengthening UNICEF, in cooperation with Oxfam and the Institute of Public Health of Serbia, facilitated the development of recommendations on 'Nutrition in transit, reception and asylum centres for children 7–17 years, pregnant and lactating women'.

As a stopgap measure, UNICEF continued to provide direct IYCF and ECD support to children and families, in partnership with a range of CSOs, through mother-and-baby corners in Serbia, which continue to be recognized as a good practice in the region. UNICEF also continued to advocate for immunization of refugee and migrant children, which only ensured for refugee and migrant children born in Serbia. Following the measles outbreak, Médecins sans Frontières was able to vaccinate all refugee and migrant children against measles, mumps and rubella. At the request of the MoH, UNICEF supported the drafting of national procedures for nutrition, as part of the development of a national health emergency response plan.

Goal area 2: Every child learns

Ensuring multi-partner commitment and action to quality inclusive education at all levels – from early childhood, through primary and into the second decade of life – is one of UNICEF's key priorities.

Evidence shows that early childhood education (ECE) plays a crucial role in children's brain development and has a lifelong impact on their present and future health, well-being and learning. Currently, coverage for early childhood education for children aged 3–5 is 50 per cent, which means that half of all children in Serbia are missing out on the opportunity to develop to their full potential. The figures also mask much sharper disparities for the most vulnerable children: only 9 per cent from the poorest families, 6 per cent living in Roma settlements and an estimated 1.2 per cent of children with disabilities receive early childhood education.

Recognizing the significance of ECE, expanding ECE services and improving their quality have become government priorities. The adoption of a new preschool curriculum framework was a

cornerstone in 2018, introducing key systemic changes to preschool education. It provides a common foundation for curriculum development in nursery, preschool and preparatory pre-school programmes and promotes a coherent approach to young children's learning and development – from their enrolment in early childhood education and care until they enter elementary school. To support national roll-out of the new curriculum, competency standards for preschool teachers and minimum resource standards (e.g., physical facilities planning, essential equipment and materials) were developed, with UNICEF Serbia support. UNICEF also supported a study on initial preschool education, recommendations from which the Ministry will use to modernize pre-service training for preschool teacher. To increase demand, a communication strategy and materials were developed, which the MoESTD will continue to use in the coming years. These achievements create a platform of wider reform of preschool education, led by the Ministry, aimed at the expansion of 17,000 preschool spaces for children and roll-out of a comprehensive capacity-building programme (training, mentoring, coaching, horizontal learning) for 12,000 preschool teachers (almost 70 per cent of all preschool teachers) on modern preschool pedagogy.

UNICEF supported an analytical review of governance, provision and quality of early childhood education services, in partnership with Yale University, to initiate system-wide changes related to governance and financing of preschool education. The review was complemented by technical support for harmonizing national and local preschool education policies through capacity building to promote evidence-based planning and development of local policies, identification of barriers for increasing equity, local partnerships and diversified preschool service provision.

From an equity perspective, UNICEF continued to support a model for enhancing the quality of preschool education for children with disabilities, with the aim of supporting the transition from 'developmental groups' (segregated groups for children with a disability) into mainstream preschool groups, to improve inclusion and foster everyday interaction among all children. These efforts were complemented by the development of a conceptual framework for promoting a safe and stimulating environment for children, focusing on respect and promotion of diversity, fairness and social inclusion. Results will be documented to inform the Government's plan to ensure equitable enrolment of the most vulnerable children in preschool.

National efforts to promote quality teaching and learning continue, as do efforts to ensure that all children have access to these services. Under the leadership of the MoESTD, UNICEF continued to collaborate with partners to increase the number of vulnerable children who have access to and attend inclusive and quality education.

Due to a clear shift towards a mainstreaming approach, the policies and implementation measures for addressing the challenges stemming from equity-related problems in the Serbian education system are highly relevant. The inclusion policy is comprehensive and addresses almost all relevant dimensions of societal disadvantages: low social status and poverty, as well as ethnicity and disability. Serbia's continuing commitment to inclusive education (IE) is embodied by its adherence to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, which will foster further horizontal exchange and cooperation in the provision of such education. UNICEF supported further national efforts, both in policy environment and capacity-strengthening in 2018; however, support needs to be scaled up to ensure that good practices have a systemic impact on a larger scale.

To complement the existing legal framework promoting inclusive education, UNICEF supported

the MoESTD to develop/revise by-laws defining additional support in education, inter-sectoral committees, individual education plans, pedagogical assistance, procedures and mechanisms in cases of discrimination.

To support advocacy efforts and broaden partnerships, with UNICEF support the MoESTD organized a national conference on inclusive education. Key conclusions highlighted the need to continue joint efforts to support a quality and inclusive learning environment through further strengthening of legal, strategic and institutional frameworks, inter-sectoral cooperation, enhancement of education staff competencies, adequate financing, school support mechanisms and regular monitoring and evaluation. UNICEF will continuously advocate for these recommendations to be reflected in the inclusive education action plan and the 2030 education development strategy.

UNICEF continued to support the strengthening of capacity of the overall education system at various levels. Technical support was provided to the MoESTD to ensure that capacity of the group for social inclusion is strengthened to lead, implement and monitor inclusive education at policy and implementation levels. In cooperation with partners, further capacity strengthening efforts on inclusive education focused on teachers and educational institutions. To further accelerate results around continuous professional development – and in line with the digitalization of education, prioritized by the Government – UNICEF partnered with the Institute for the Improvement of Education to establish a continuing e-learning platform for educators, which will promote and host open-source e-learning courses in the most critical areas of learning and pedagogical work. Further roll-out of the teacher training package for inclusive education was supported through the expansion of the training pool (university professors and school teachers) and roll-out to schools.

As a result of UNICEF's partnership with the Network for Support to Inclusive Education, support and capacity development on this education was provided to 32 educational institutions serving 16,894 students, and 1,613 education practitioners. Seventy additional schools were strengthened to combat drop-out, and inter-sectoral cooperation between education and the social welfare system was developed. Replication of the successful model on drop-out prevention is ongoing but needs to be accelerated for national scale-up.

UNICEF's support in 2018 also focused on generating critical evidence and analysis to further inform policy and programme development and implementation, and promote human and financial investment in the education sector. In cooperation with the MoESTD, in 2018 UNICEF supported a feasibility study on introducing mandatory secondary education in Serbia, as well as a study on evaluation and assessment of the education system, in cooperation with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Both studies will inform major policy changes.

In line with the education strategy 2020, UNICEF will continue to use evidence from pilots and technical expertise to harness its strong relationship with the MoESTD to inform scale-up of quality inclusive education. Launching new initiatives – such as the development of 21st century skills-oriented education for adolescents and junior secondary school students – will also be prioritized in 2019.

UNICEF continued to support the MoESTD and the SCRM to provide access to education for refugee and migrant children, through formal and non-formal education, capacity building and the development of quality assurance mechanisms. As a result, 45 per cent of children are

enrolled in preschool, over 90 per cent in primary school, and around 10 per cent in secondary school.

To ensure sustainability, the MoESTD took over support for regional administrations and schools in localities where refugee and migrant centres are located – initiated in cooperation with UNICEF in 2017. Consequently, UNICEF could strategically support other capacity strengthening initiatives aimed at improving education quality and enrolment and retention of children at other levels of education, such as pre-primary.

UNICEF also focused on continuous improvement of education quality through continual monitoring and data collection from teachers, mentors, refugee and migrant children and their parents. UNICEF continued to provide technical assistance to CSO partners working in all refugee and migrant centres on non-formal education activities, aimed at developing key competencies for lifelong learning, including activities in support of regular and safe school attendance.

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

UNICEF continued to support strategic social protection interventions aimed at family strengthening and prevention of child/family separation and placement of children into formal care. Following a positive evaluation of the family outreach worker (FOW) service related to preventing separation and increasing parental skills, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs (MoLEVSA) committed in 2017 to institutionalizing this service, piloted with UNICEF's support. To that end, UNICEF provided technical assistance for amendments to the Social Welfare Law, to include provisions enabling financing of family support services from the national budget and transformation of child homes into centres for family and child support. However, since the amendments were not yet endorsed, UNICEF continued to support the family outreach worker service as a stopgap measure. By end-2018 it had reached over 900 families and 2,000 children since its establishment. To accompany the national roll-out of family support services, UNICEF, in cooperation with the Republic Institute for Social Protection, strengthened the capacity of social welfare professionals to prevent child/family separation. To support advocacy efforts and broaden partnerships, good practices in family strengthening services and programmes from Serbia were documented and widely disseminated in-country, but also at the high-level European Commission forum on family and community-based care for children across Europe, held in Brussels in June 2018.

The roll-out of family support services will rely heavily on professionals from the social welfare system, whose caseload is already heavy, in part due to the capon public employment. Thus UNICEF also focused on generating evidence to further inform policy and programme development and implementation, as well as human and financial investment in the social protection sector. In cooperation with the Republic Institute of Social Protection, research focusing on case-management and quality of social work provision will inform further investments into social work provision and its quality. Comprehensive case management will remain a major area of support in coming years, and continuity of reforms is needed, while not putting at risk efficiency, effectiveness and quality of protection of the most vulnerable families with children. The research on the well-being of adolescents in foster care, implemented in cooperation with Serbia's Faculty of Political Science and Institute for Psychology, will be used in 2019 for advocacy and technical assistance to the Government tied to further investment in family-based care options.

Progress was made in strengthening the lead role of the social welfare system in advancing the policy framework on violence against children, upgrading capacity of local inter-sectoral teams, supporting active advocacy by NGOs at the national and local levels, upgrading data collection and addressing child marriage.

There is growing and significant commitment to protecting children from violence and abuse in Serbia, embodied by the recent commitment by MoLEVSA to join the global partnership for protection of children from violence.

Building on evidence generated on drivers and determinants of violence against children, UNICEF supported development of a national strategy, which was in the final stage of adoption by the Government at year's-end. Further technical support was provided for draft amendments to the Family Law, to ensure an explicit ban on corporal punishment of children. Local advocacy campaigns carried out by members of the national network of CSOs working for children in Serbia, in partnership with UNICEF, also contributed to growing awareness about societal factors that perpetuate violence against children, resulting in a commitment by 29 local self-governments to work across sectors.

UNICEF supported the upgrading of social welfare and health protocols and data collection on violence against children, which will continue during the next reporting period and will require further alignment.

Creating protective environments for girls, boys and adolescents requires participation and improved services across all sectors. In cooperation with partners, UNICEF continued to support the development of multisectoral responses to curb violence and improve services. Given the growing importance of virtual communication in the lives of children, UNICEF, with support from Telenor, continued to support the MoESTD to strengthen digital competency among children aged four to eight and their parents to decrease exposure to online risks; while at the same time, implementing gender awareness and violence prevention programmes. The institutionalization of ParentLine (a free counselling service on parenting), initiated with UNICEF support, demonstrates the Government's commitment to promoting positive parenting, equipping parents with skills and knowledge on how to support their children in a more constructive way. More than 1,600 instances of tele-advice were provided to parents in 2018, a 90 per cent increase over 2017 (872).

In addition to the system strengthening approach to support children affected by violence, more foundational violence prevention remains a key priority for the remainder of the country programme; i.e., wide and comprehensive promotion of positive parenting to prevent violence from occurring.

With almost 60 per cent of Roma girls married before 18 years of age, child marriage is one of the prevalent forms of violence against children. This issue received increasing high-level attention in 2018, leading to the upcoming establishment of a National Coalition Against Child Marriage, co-chaired by the Gender Coordination Body and Roma CSO. UNICEF successfully advocated for an approach to ending child marriage that recognizes the complex nature of the problem and the socio-cultural and structural factors underpinning the practice. Consequently, a comprehensive multisectoral response to child marriage was initiated in 20 Roma settlements, reaching 330 girls, involving a wide range of partners across the social welfare, health and education sectors. Monitoring of interventions highlighted that such programmes will require medium- to long-term investment to change behaviours.

Taken together, these efforts provided a solid foundation for the Government's endeavour to strengthen the child protection system, ensuring its effectiveness and responsiveness to the needs of children and their families. Efforts included key elements needed for a holistic approach, such as acknowledging the importance of social work, child and family welfare services; referral and coordination mechanisms; and cross-sectoral collaboration and responses. Models and experiences are being documented to increase awareness of the need for child and family protection and welfare services among national and local authorities and policy-makers, and to leverage ownership and resources.

UNICEF continued to support national efforts to strengthen the justice system for children, in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), MoLEVSA and CSOs. Support was provided for legal reform processes, capacity building of professionals and knowledge-generation efforts, with a view to ensuring better administration of justice for children and the implementation of child-sensitive procedures, and to identifying the gaps in children's right to equitable access to legal aid services.

After intensive capacity building in a selected number of locations during previous years – which helped increase the implementation of diversionary schemes from 3.2 per cent to 28 per cent – no significant progress was documented in 2018. This proves the importance of continuous capacity building and scale-up, but also points to the need to amend existing legislation to clarify the accountability of the justice and social welfare sectors, including issues related to financing of diversion measures. Therefore, and with a view to contributing to the continuity of reforms, UNICEF efforts in 2018 combined advocacy and capacity building.

Under MoJ leadership, UNICEF provided technical support to the Juvenile Justice Council to strengthen its monitoring and advisory role in advancing the implementation of criminal proceedings and sanctions for juvenile offenders, and to advocate for relevant regulatory changes. As a result, the Council formulated initial recommendations for regulatory changes, and after reaching consensus with a wider professional audience at a national conference held in November, the proposed inputs for regulatory changes were submitted to the MoJ. In parallel, and building on results achieved in piloting diversion measures and alternative sanctions, UNICEF sought to interest municipalities in scaling-up the initiative. Over one third (almost 60) of all municipalities requested such support and committed their own financial and human resources. Due to budget constraints, UNICEF was only able to provide mentoring support to the nine most affected municipalities, and was actively fundraising to support the MoJ's efforts in that regard during 2019.

Support to four regional child victim protection units, in the form of hands-on support to prosecutors, judges and the guardianship authority for all cases involving child victims and witnesses in court proceedings, continued until August 2018. Fifty-six children received direct assistance in 2018 (total of 223 children since 2015). A unified information management system was developed, providing valuable inputs to the June 2018 overall assessment of service provision. The assessment documented the positive impact of support provided to children in court proceedings, and is being used in ongoing advocacy aimed at ensuring institutionalization of the service, so it is made available to all children in need across the country. In parallel, an inter-sectoral training package on working with child victims and witnesses in court proceedings was developed, targeting judges, prosecutors, centres for social work, police, the bar chamber and the Judicial Academy. Tailor-made guidelines for prosecutors and judges on interviewing child victims and witnesses are under development and

should be finalized in 2019.

At the request of the MoJ, a national database on child-related key indicators in civil proceedings was operationalized in 2018 (to be finalized in 2019). It should serve as the key missing tool to monitor and continually improve practice in protecting children's best interests in civil proceedings.

UNICEF continued to play a lead coordination role in the protection of refugee and migrant children. The programmatic response was adapted to the changing nature of the migration situation, which is now characterized by longer stays in Serbia and a substantial ratio of unaccompanied and separated children and families with children. In line with its Core Commitments for Children, UNICEF promoted a two-pronged approach combining humanitarian service delivery with capacity building, policy reform and technical assistance for addressing overall child protection needs, including gender-based violence, with partner organizations and governments. With an eye to systems strengthening, key government institutions are supported to ensure protective guardianship, support for cases of gender-based violence, safe and ethical case management of children in need, and a more inclusive education system.

UNICEF's support to MoLEVSA, the SCRM and CSOs focused on strengthening child protection and gender-based violence capacities for the identification and protection of most-vulnerable children and UASC. Joint advocacy efforts with the United Nations International Organization on Migration and the United Nations High Commission on Refugees resulted in availability of separate accommodation for unaccompanied children in refugee and migrant shelters or within the formal foster care system, to reduce risks of violence and abuse. Despite progress made, systematic support for these children is an ongoing challenge and requires constant technical support and advocacy.

Together with MoLEVSA, UNICEF facilitated a participatory forum for sharing experience and identifying gaps and priorities for child protection prevention and response through its monthly coordination of the child protection working group. Civil society members and state actors attended the meetings to share information on the services available to children, overcome barriers to assistance provision and develop joint tools to ensure a better coordinated response. As part of its coordination efforts, UNICEF strengthened the capacity of CSO partners on preventing sexual abuse and exploitation and supported the development/strengthening of safeguarding policies.

Good practices from Serbia's response to the refugee and migrant crisis were shared with similarly affected neighbouring countries through horizontal cooperation and partnership. As a stopgap measure, UNICEF continued to provide direct child protection and response services and assistance to unaccompanied and separated children and families, in partnership with a range of CSOs.

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

Recognizing that students of all ages can actively study and participate in school safety measures and work with teachers and other adults in the community to minimize risks before, during and after disasters, UNICEF Serbia continued to support government efforts to mainstream disaster risk reduction in the education sector. Learning outcomes were included in the new legal framework for education. The guidebook for primary school teachers for

mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in curricula is available online to all teachers, and 680 hard copies were also distributed to schools.

In close collaboration with the Public Investment Management Office (PIMO) and the MoESTD UNICEF also continued its cooperation with the Primary School Teachers' Association to strengthen the capacity of schools and teachers in disaster-prone areas through project-based learning, reaching 11,000 students. To accelerate results, the training will be accredited by MoESTD in 2019, and the process will continue to receive PIMO support, to ensure sustainability.

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

This period of intensified reform processes in Serbia highlights the paramount importance of evidence-driven policy-making. To that end, sound data about the current situation and existing and emerging trends in children's well-being are vital.

In support of the MoESTD's strategic decision to establish an education management information system for preschool education, UNICEF technical assistance resulted in the development of a protocol and by-law for issuing a unique identification number to each child in the education system. An additional by-law, on the education information system registry, was also being finalized. This forms the legal basis for collection and handling of personal data on children. The module for data collection on children in preschool education is finalized and will be functional in early 2019. Establishment of the education management information system will be a landmark achievement, enabling the education sector to make robust decisions to support an equitable distribution of resources and uplift the quality of education.

Despite some delays, 2018 saw the completion of several stages in the sixth round of MICS implementation – a household survey that is a critical source of in-depth, disaggregated data across numerous areas such as health and nutrition, early childhood development, violence and poverty, and the sole source of data for key national strategic documents. The MICS technical and steering committee, composed of representatives from all relevant institutions, actively participated in the selection of MICS modules to be implemented and the adaptation of survey instruments. The country survey plan was prepared and approved through a regional and global quality assurance process. Pre-testing of questionnaires took place in December 2018.

Under the leadership of Serbia's Institute of Public Health, UNICEF supported the establishment of a Registry of Children with Disabilities to facilitate the documentation and measurement of health and disability in children and youth, in line with the WHO international classification of functioning, disability and health for children and youth. The expert working group developed methodological guidance for practitioners who will populate the data in the registry; piloting began in April 2018. Further work on software development for the registry will make it a part of the overall health information system for national scale-up. Following the request of MoLEVSA, the methodology for the functional assessment is being adapted to suit the purpose of assessing eligibility for extended leave for the care of children until they reach the age of five. Integration of the functional assessment into the process related to social protection benefit represents a crucial step and an anchor for further revision of other disability-related benefits.

As a prerequisite to costing the economic burden of violence against children (as part of the

overall framework), UNICEF's research on adverse childhood experiences, carried out in partnership with the Institute of Psychology and the Institute of Mental Health, was finalized in 2018.

In addition to meeting the need for data on children, UNICEF supported civil society organizations and independent institutions – an essential element of a child rights monitoring system – to enable them to closely follow whether children's rights are being respected and protected in practice. As actors providing an array of services to children in need and helping them voice their rights, it is critical that these actors be equipped with adequate knowhow to perform monitoring. To that end, UNICEF worked with organizations active across different sectors.

Fostering stronger linkages and better coordination among civil society organizations was an objective underpinning all initiatives, both completed and ongoing. Members of the Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia, supported by UNICEF, effectively participated in the work of the Council for Child Rights and established cooperation with the Office of Human and Minority Rights. The network also participated actively in the development of the new strategy on social welfare and revision of the Law on Social Welfare.

Under the leadership of the Office of Human and Minority Rights and in partnership with CSOs, UNICEF supported the development of a monitoring system for implementation of recommendations by the committee on the rights of the child, which will be submitted for adoption to the Government Council for Monitoring Implementation of Recommendations of United Nations Human Rights Mechanisms.

Serbia's Commissioner for Equality, in close cooperation with the MoESTD, developed draft manuals to guide pupils, parents and teachers on how to recognize and act in cases of discrimination in education and how to put the regulations into practice.

To amplify the voices and views of young people and citizens' engagement, during 2018 UNICEF increasingly partnered with youth groups. It took preliminary steps to establish the online platform U-report, which will be rolled out in 2019, enabling consultations and dialogue with young people throughout the country. Under the leadership of the Commissioner, with UNICEF support, a new youth panel began engaging in social media to increase awareness on issues of discrimination among their peers and the wider society.

A special report on the status of children, providing an overview of implementation of recommendations to Serbia by the Committee on the Rights of the Child was published by the ombudsman, with UNICEF support. Participation by Serbia's deputy ombudsman in the activities of the European Network of Ombudsmen for Children sought to strengthen partnerships with EU institutions and build horizontal cooperation. Further, UNICEF supported work by the ombudsman of the autonomous province of Vojvodina to strengthen the capacity of members of the Vojvodina Parliament on issues of child rights.

UNICEF continuously supported the work of the Council for Child Rights. Key achievements in 2018 included: signing of the call to action on early childhood development by three key ministers (health, education and social welfare); a recommendation that Serbia to join the global partnership to end violence against children; and advocacy with the Government's General Secretariat to begin measuring, monitoring and reporting on public expenditure for children.

To promote social inclusion of children with disabilities, UNICEF support for two disabled persons organizations to engage in community mobilization continued in 2018, reaching around 1,700 children with and without disabilities.

Part 3: Lessons learned and constraints

Partnerships in 2018 presented challenges as well as opportunities, but overall, effective partnerships continued to support the improvement of children lives. Investing more in strategic partnerships and partnership management will require further attention to maximize impact. The cap on public employment, combined with frequent staff turnover across all sectors, continued to negatively affect the delivery of social services. UNICEF addressed this to some extent by investing in capacity development interventions. This strategy embeds routine capacity strengthening into existing pre-service and in-service training, with the aim of creating a continuum of technical capacity among professionals in these sectors, year after year.

While the Government and line ministries recognize the strategic need for data and evidence-based decision-making, the operationalization and institutionalization of data collection systems requires commitment at different levels of governance. Strong coordination is needed, but sometimes fails due to competing priorities and diverse interests in the long-term planning for data. The upcoming partnership in 2019 with the National Academy of Public Administration may partially fill this gap by ensuring that future civil servants are trained not only on child rights, but also on gathering and analysing data.

Social policy reforms began unfolding in Serbia in 2000, under the overarching narrative of decentralization. During the last 15 years, reforms have been implemented consistently, but slowly and with interruptions at times. However, in 2018 the EU warned that there had been no progress in decentralization or the availability of social protection services at the local level. A number of challenges remain to ensure adequate funding for services, as well as implementation and quality assurance monitoring at a decentralized level.

Serbia remains a country where overseas development assistance is not a contributor to programmes for children, with the exception of a small number of international donors. UNICEF worked to build solid relationships with key international partners – including the EU – to secure additional financial resources to support areas of mutual interest. A key pillar of UNICEF's approach to resource mobilization in Serbia has been to identify where its programme priorities for children best match the broader social development interests of international partners, and to demonstrate how these aspirational goals can be effectively translated into practical progress and results through investment in the UNICEF country programme.

Ensuring longer-term sustainability of initiatives for children is recognized as a challenge in any context with multiple national priorities. A focus on sustainability and scale-up of programmes and services for children and families will be essential as the current programme nears completion. Strong evidence generation on what works and what does not will continue to guide programme adaptation and implementation, to ensure that what is taken to scale is appropriate and sustainable. The costing of programmes will provide the necessary information to Government and partners regarding the investment needed to scale up and sustain results for children. Advocacy for increased financial commitment from the Government will be needed to create the fiscal space for improving access to and quality of services– especially for

vulnerable groups and those living in rural and remote communities. To accelerate results for children, UNICEF will also further explore opportunities to develop public–private partnerships.

A strategy for continued attention and growth involves working with the private sector to harness the power of business and markets for children and foster innovation, including business’s networks and capacity for driving change, to seek more innovative and effective solutions. From the resource mobilization side, private sector operations in the office were further strengthened, resulting in doubling the number of pledge donors. Engagement with private sector will remain a priority area in 2019. UNICEF will continue to pursue the use of innovative means for communicating, monitoring programmes and making the voices and power of children and adolescents heard. The priority placed on digitalization by the Government offers multiple opportunities to advance children rights, notably in the field of education; UNICEF will further build on this.

In a financially constrained environment such as is Serbia, it is understandable that investment in child development should be linked to a clear fiscal framework. For this reason, UNICEF will prioritize cost-benefit analysis across sectors in future advocacy priorities, particularly when increased public expenditure is needed to fulfil children rights. Looking ahead, UNICEF Serbia will place stronger emphasis on public finance for children and consider the inclusion of sustainability costings in the scope of pilot programmes, so that a focus on the longer-term investment needed to scale up successful programmes is included from the inception phase.

Changing behaviours and social norm is a long-term and complex process that requires investment not only in intensive and repetitive messaging and dialogue, but also to ensure the availability of services and a supportive environment. Lack of access to services or inadequate service provision combined with incomplete information can breed resentment and mistrust, leading to rumours and misconceptions and further fuelling discrimination. In this regard, UNICEF will need to invest in further efforts in coming years.

External communication activities allowed UNICEF to pass along important advocacy messages and strengthen its positioning in key reform areas. Activities organized by UNICEF for World Children’s Day in 2018 confirmed the great leveraging potential of these special events. Schools, the private sector and national institutions responded to UNICEF’s appeal to engage, and the anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child did not pass unnoticed. The year 2019 will mark 30 years since the adoption of the Convention, giving UNICEF an opportunity to make the voices of children heard at the national level throughout the year, and also to engage in more sustainable partnerships with local actors.

Finally, in the framework of UN coherence, the need for more frequent dialogue among agencies on progress and perspectives is crucially needed. Increased frequency will allow for improved analysis of cooperation opportunities and a stronger appreciation of results against the United Nations development assistance framework. Going forward, UNICEF Serbia views UN Reform as an opportunity to further embed children’s rights in the UN narrative and action.

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