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Academic programme for youth policy specialists and youth workers

In March, UNICEF in Azerbaijan came together with the partners from Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Education, the Youth Foundation and implementing partner of the programme Public Academy under the President of Azerbaijan in a round table session to discuss existing Master’s degree programme for preparation and accreditation of qualified youth policy specialists and youth work managers. The six universities that enrolled and started the programme in 2018 attended master trainings with the consultation of international UNICEF experts representing Tallinn State University in Estonia. Currently the abovementioned universities are developing practical sections of the curriculum and will start the course in September 2019 – the first if its kind academic programme in the country preparing youth managers.
A new partnership to improve health of mothers and babies in Azerbaijan

UNICEF signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Azerbaijan State Agency for Mandatory Health Insurance with the participation of UNICEF Representative to Azerbaijan Edward Carwardine and Chairman of the Executive Board of the Agency Mr. Zaur Aliyev. The Memorandum sets out areas of cooperation between UNICEF and the State Agency including integration of baby friendly hospital standards into maternity departments in hospitals and trainings on Guidelines of Monitoring of Child Development and on infant and young child feeding counselling for frontline health workers as part of broader capacity building on essential child health and nutrition services.

New strategy to support social and behavioural change on inclusive education

In February, a workshop was organized for the representatives of the Ministries of Education, Labour and Social Protection of the Population, Health, and the State Committee for Family, Women and Children’s Affairs, alongside non-government organizations and UN agencies, to present a new communication for behavioural and social change strategy and action plan in support of inclusive education for children with disabilities. Part of the European Union supported initiative, the strategy sets out necessary steps required to address stigma and discrimination towards children with disabilities and to include them into mainstream education. Workshop participants discussed recommended actions suggested by the strategy and suggested additional ways to reach children with disabilities and their families.

National Sustainable Development Agenda focuses on priorities for children

The National Coordination Council for Sustainable Development (NCCSD) and the State Committee for Family, Women and Children’s Affairs (SCFWCA) advanced work on the development of a National Plan of Action for Children and the SDGs, with the support of UNICEF. The preparation of the National Plan of Action is part of the Government’s efforts to set national priorities in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals. A one-day workshop was supported by UNICEF to bring together Government partners to discuss nationalization of SDGs for children in Azerbaijan. The National Plan of Action aims to define and put in place the policies, actions and resources needed to successfully achieve the SDGs in relation to children.

Voice of young people in Azerbaijan represented at annual Economic and Social Council Youth Forum

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum took place in April in New York, providing a platform for young leaders around the world to engage in a dialogue with United Nations Member States on how to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. UNICEF supported the participation at the Forum of Elman Suleymanov, a writer and youth advocate who has a visual impairment. As a representative of Azerbaijani youth, Elman participated in different panels and raised issues relevant to young people in the country.

For Elman’s interview please see page 4
Quality of inclusive education enhanced by teacher training

As part of the joint project “Expanding Inclusive Education in Azerbaijan” led by the Ministry of Education with the support of UNICEF and the European Union, a training of trainers took place with the participation of 33 teachers from six universities across the country and 54 primary school teachers. The series of two-week training courses under the supervision of a team of international experts will contribute to capacity building of both university and primary school teachers, who will then go on to work as trainers across seven districts. The programme is expected to reach more than 300 university teachers, 1,300 pedagogical university students and more than 10,000 primary school teachers over the next two years. The roll-out of the inclusive education training to pre-service teacher training universities began in April with over 260 teachers from universities in Baku, Sheki, Guba, Ganja and Sumgayit trained in the key concepts and delivery of inclusive education in schools. The training programme will be integrated into the curriculum of the teacher training universities to ensure continuous development of national capacities in inclusive education.

Partners visit project sites to support young people in the region

In February, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, His Excellency Onno Kerves and UNICEF Representative to Azerbaijan Edward Carwardine visited programmes supported by the Government of the Netherlands for young people in Mingachavir. These include activities delivered through the Mingachavir Youth House, such as Basic Life Skills, and a soccer programme for girls as part of the #GirlsCan campaign led by UNICEF, the Azerbaijan Football Association and the Embassy of the Netherlands.

The visitors spent time with young people in both programmes, hearing more about their ideas, interests and aspirations. Mr. Carwardine and Ambassador Kerves also met with the Head of the Mingachavir Executive Administration Mr. Ilham Ismayilov to discuss UNICEF’s contributions to the social development of the district.

The visitors also saw first-hand the work of the UNICEF-supported Community-Based Social Service Centre in Agjabedy, implemented jointly by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population and Youth Education Centre. The NGO team explained the social work process in support of vulnerable children and families, their provision of child development services for children with developmental delays and disabilities, psycho-social rehabilitation and integration services for children in conflict and contact with the law.

Parents of the children emphasized the positive impact of the initiative and noted the results of the services for their children and families. The visitors also met with the Head of the Agjabedy Executive Administration Mr. Shahin Mammadov who acknowledged UNICEF’s contributions to the social development of the district and expressed his commitment to continuing the co-operation.
Highlight

UNICEF supported the participation of Elman Suleymanov, a writer and youth advocate, at the United Nations Economic and Social Council Youth Forum.

Could you please share your impressions from participating at the ECOSOC Youth Forum this year?

United Nations Economic and Social Council Youth Forum is held every year at the UN Headquarters in New York. All UN Member States from around the world are entitled to participate in this Forum and most of them tend to exercise this right. Thus, as representatives from Azerbaijan, we also participated in the discussions held within the framework of ECOSOC Youth Forum along with the representatives of African, European, Latin American and Asian countries.

Being nominated by UNICEF Azerbaijan, I was also representing young people of our country. Officially the country was represented at the Forum by the Minister of Youth and Sport of Azerbaijan Republic Mr. Azad Rahimov. During the forum I participated in the discussions with young people from other countries, we have exchanged ideas and experiences, I shared what is being done in Azerbaijan in the youth area.

Young participants of the Forum were enthusiastic. They were not merely outlining problems faced by young people in their countries but tried to find solutions. I really wish to see the same level of enthusiasm and proactiveness among young people of my country.

Putting aside the official and formal speeches, the discussed topics were mainly related to ecology, environment and pollution, gender equality and education. Although certain work is being carried out in Azerbaijan in these fields – by Government and UN agencies, there is still room for improvement and we should work together to achieve great results in this areas.

What was the most interesting topic for you personally?

Education is the most important issue for me. It is the 4th Sustainable Development Goal (Inclusive and equitable education). I even participated in the trainings organized within the framework of the Forum. It was at the Forum that I realized that developed countries of Europe and North America have succeeded in eliminating problems concerning equitable and accessible education. So they were not that active in discussing those issues at the Forum. However, it was very different for some African countries – representatives of which showed great interest in this field. We were talking about access to quality education for all.
Early Learning Centres in Azerbaijan: Developing minds, friendships and communities

By Elaine Holder

It’s Monday morning in a classroom of School 280 in the small town of Hovsan, just half an hour drive from Baku. The lesson begins with the teacher and children greeting each other in a circle. One could be mistaken for thinking this was an ordinary class of schoolchildren. These students, however, are pre-schoolers aged between 3 and 5 years old. This class is part of a new initiative called the Community-Based Early Learning Centre programme, conceived jointly by the Azerbaijan Institute of Education and UNICEF.

Early Learning Centres provide a structured, but play-orientated learning environment, aiding a child’s intellectual, social and emotional development. Samaye Madatova has been teaching the pre-schoolers since the programme started. She is very positive about the impact it will have on the children’s development, “I think this is a great project, the children will begin learning here and this will prepare them for primary school.” The programme started in October 2017 at 50 locations and expanded to 50 more centres in 2018, in a country with a very low pre-school enrolment rate of 16.7 per cent of 1-5 years’ olds.

“The students also have the opportunity to socialise with other children and adults, this helps them to communicate their thoughts in a more positive and constructive manner.”

“The students also have the opportunity to socialise with other children and adults, this helps them to communicate their thoughts in a more positive and constructive manner,” Madatova adds.

Educators involved in the programme were selected by the Ministry of Education and attended a specially designed pre-school education training programme. Vefa Shukurova formerly taught Azerbaijani language and literature before being chosen for this project. “At first, I was apprehensive, but I have found the whole experience very interesting. It’s a very important programme and I really enjoy helping the children develop in this way,” she explains.

Students attend the Early Learning Centre twice a week for two hours. Elnara Aliyeva and her daughter Nuray have a one-hour journey to the Early Learning Centre, which is located at the primary school in Hovsan. “In total, it takes four hours of our day, but it is worth the time and effort. My child learns a lot here, I can’t provide the same level of early development at home.”

At the Early Learning Centre, every parent interviewed remarked upon how their child’s language and social skills had improved since starting the programme. Samira Heydarova comments on her daughter’s progress “She started talking very late, when she was already 3 years old. We weren’t able to send her to kindergarten, so being given the opportunity for early education has been great. Her speech improved dramatically and now she doesn’t stop talking.” Aygun Hajiyeva explains how the programme has made a huge difference to how her son Nihat interacts with others. “My child was shy and nervous. This has been like a psychological rehabilitation for him, it has had a positive effect on his well-being. He spends time with other kids and doesn’t want to go home at the end of the lesson.”

Some children adapt quickly, but others need their parents to be present at least for some period of time – so parents may stay during the lesson. One mother exclaimed “I actually enjoy sitting in on the class! I can learn things too, for example facts about our country and the environment. We also pick up useful tips to help our children at home.”

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In rural areas, where access to services and information is limited and many families have low socio-economic status, the environment for childhood development is not very favourable. There are limited opportunities for pre-school children to be exposed to any kind of development, be it cultural, educational or social. For us it was crucial that we find a way to reach those children,” says UNICEF Education Specialist Leyla Hasanova.

The Early Learning Centre in Hovsan has become a social hub for many parents. Bringing children to pre-school gives parents a chance to socialise and network with others. Many mothers confessed that they did not have much of a social life away from home and family. Aygun Aliyeva states “Most of us are housewives and we didn’t do much away from our homes. Our children have made friends through the Early Learning Centre and so have we.”

“It’s a good way to stimulate local communities, to make people more responsible for what is happening around them.”

Creating a supportive community culture has benefits beyond personal friendships, “It’s a good way to stimulate local communities, to make people more responsible for what is happening around them,” says Hasanova, explaining the potential of such programmes to engage communities in other areas.

There has been a great deal of interest and demand for the programme from local communities. However, there is a bigger demand than can currently be supplied. In rural communities, only 16 per cent of children have access to pre-school education, while in Baku the figure is much higher at 37 per cent. “Hopefully in a few years we can talk about a significant increase in the number of centres. I hope we can at least double or triple this number,” she says.

The Ministry of Education will continue strengthening the programme in 50 community-based Early Learning Centres supported by UNICEF. Additionally, 50 more centres around the country will be established by the Government funded by the State budget, the European Union and UNICEF.

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