

Social Protection for Children

A CALL TO ACTION

In Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, representatives from governments and development partners from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Serbia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Georgia and Moldova came together, from 16 – 18 October 2017, at a sub-regional conference on ***Social Protection for Children dedicated to sharing good practices***. The conference was organized by UNICEF Bosnia and Herzegovina with support from the UNICEF Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) and country offices in the sub-region.

The objectives of the Conference were to:

- promote high level cooperation, share lessons learned and best practices, and foster innovation across the region;
- reinforce a commitment to child-sensitive social protection systems and place this item on the agendas of the participating countries through the development of a Call to Action;
- advocate for social protection systems that effectively help families cope with shocks or crises so that children’s development is not impaired by the effects of poverty and vulnerability.

Situation

- **Child poverty is high and makes children vulnerable in multiple and mutually reinforcing ways.** The western Balkans sub-region has some of the highest child poverty rates in the CEECIS region. Often, children are more likely to be living in poverty than any other social or demographic group. Children living in poverty experience deprivations in multiple and interlinked dimensions. In addition, migrant and refugee children, children with disabilities, minorities, and marginalized communities continue to face significant barriers in accessing services.
- While social protection systems are relatively well developed across the sub-region, many are failing to provide effective protection for the poorest and most vulnerable children. And, although cash benefits are more often than not allocated to children and families in need (meaning that programmes have relatively low *inclusion* errors), many children and families in need are not being reached. Targeting mechanisms are getting narrower leading to **exclusions from coverage of the poorest and most vulnerable children.**
- **Inadequacy of benefits.** Benefit amounts are inadequate, precluding them from having a significant impact on poverty. National poverty lines and subsistence minimums are set at levels that are too low to capture children’s actual conditions, resulting in inadequate benefit and coverage levels.

- **Declining social protection expenditures.** Expenditure on child and family benefits, and social support and care services for children, as a proportion of social protection expenditure, is falling in a number of countries. This calls into question countries' commitment to reducing poverty and exclusion among poor children, which has considerable long-term repercussions for society and the economy.
- Although the western Balkans have, relatively, the region's strongest tradition of social support services, **most of the existing programmes are still limited in scope and effectiveness, especially for the most vulnerable.** Children and families living in rural areas are at a significant disadvantage when accessing support services. Disparities in access are also related to considerable territorial disparities and inequalities in provision of benefits and services depending on where a person lives. In addition, social protection benefits and other social support and care services are not sufficiently linked as is necessary to address the multiple drivers of poverty and social exclusion.
- **Insufficient social service providers' capacity (e.g. Centre for Social Work)** represent another obstacle to quality functioning of social protection systems and meeting the needs of children and families. Centres for Social Work are mostly understaffed, they lack capacity for outreach and the cooperation with the other social services providers such as non-governmental organisations is not institutionalised. Information systems could be improved.

We can no longer afford to continue ignoring the issues above. It is time to do more to end child poverty NOW.

Call to Action

Global evidence shows that social protection is one of the key instruments in tackling child poverty and social exclusion. Effective social protection for children is one of the best investments governments can make. It ensures that even the poorest and most vulnerable children enjoy a decent standard of living and can access health, education and other services and care that allow them to realise their rights and full development potential. Social protection also contributes to building social cohesion, economic growth, and resilience in the face of crises.

The commitment to building effective social protection systems is evident in the Post-2015 Agenda, where it appears in Sustainable Development Goals 1, 5 and 10. The importance and right to social protection are also espoused in many other international instruments and frameworks, including: the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 26 & 27 (right to social protection and an adequate standard of living); the Europe 2020 strategy; and the European Union Social Pillar and the EU Social Inclusion Agenda. In line with the Europe 2020 strategy objective of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion within the EU, and the EU Recommendation on *Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of*

Disadvantage, States are urged to address child poverty and wellbeing by adopting integrated strategies and policies that support individuals' access to adequate resources and services.

Governments and the international community in the sub-region subscribe to these commitments but action has often been inadequate.

This **Call to Action** represents the collective voice of the conference participants in calling for further investments and more responsive social protection systems for children.

Four Core Action Areas

Governments, supported by their development partners, are urged to accelerate interventions in social protection for children by ensuring that:

- 1. Adequate fiscal resources are allocated to social protection.** There is an urgent need to dedicate more investments/fiscal resources to social transfers and social support and care services that directly benefit children. This can be affordable and sustainably financed. Long-term financing strategies should be explored and implemented so as to establish new programmes, and protect and expand fiscal space for existing programmes. More generally, macroeconomic policies, fiscal strategies and public expenditures should be based on a thorough analyses of their potential impact on children.
- 2. Social protection programmes reach the poorest and most vulnerable children.** Countries must ensure that all children and families in need of social protection are reached - in particular, the poorest and marginalized children, who often encounter obstacles in claiming their rights and accessing benefits and services. Where necessary and appropriate, priority should be given to the expansion of programmes reaching children and adolescents. Social protection is effective way to address multiple child deprivations and bring about positive outcomes in health, education and overall wellbeing so efforts should be made to ensure that the most vulnerable children are benefiting.
- 3. Social protection benefits are designed to respond to children's specific needs and to enhance their wellbeing. Social protection transfers** should meaningfully contribute to the fight against child poverty and deprivations while sustainably boosting their wellbeing. While it is important that the value of social transfers be linked to a rationale that considers the actual cost of living, tying benefit levels to national poverty lines, average household consumption in the poorest quintile, or a "national minimum income" may not suffice when these benchmarks are not adequate in and of themselves. At the same time, financial/cash assistance is not the only form of social protection needed by the poor. Children living in poverty also experience multiple and often overlapping deprivations, thus needing holistic

solutions that are fine-tuned to their specific realities. **Social transfers need to be linked and coordinated with other essential complementary interventions that enhance children's wellbeing such as social care and support services.** Social care and support services and programmes can, for example, help children access early learning, education and health, as well as support parents (especially women) to access employment and active labour market interventions.

- 4. Social protection systems are comprehensive and well integrated with other sectors.** Comprehensive systems entail adequate policy, legal, institutional and oversight mechanisms. Multi-sector approaches are more effective and efficient in addressing the multiple vulnerabilities faced by children, adolescents and their families throughout the life cycle. A comprehensive "systems approach" identifies and maximizes linkages between social protection and sectoral outcomes (in education, health, nutrition, early childhood development, water and sanitation, child protection and HIV/AIDS). Strengthening of overall social protection systems needs to continue through evidence based planning, monitoring, capacity building of professionals and better outreach mechanisms and other interventions aimed to reach the most vulnerable population.