

FOCUS ON CHILDREN FROM ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC MINORITIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

The issue¹

Most modern societies are multicultural – home to different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. Societies usually consist of a majority population and one or more minority groups, however, in some cases no group is dominating.

The degree to which members of minority groups – including children and adolescents – are able to realize their rights depends on the distribution of power, cohesion and social norms that prevail in a particular society and the degree to which it ensures protection, inclusion and participation of minority groups.

In Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia² multiculturalism was actively embraced by governments during the period of communism, though often without exploring or reconciling the inter-ethnic conflicts of the past. In reality, the distribution of power in most countries and territories favoured certain population groups and discriminated against others.

After the break up of Yugoslavia and of the Soviet Union, newly independent states had to define their national identity, which in many cases became the identity of the dominant ethnicity. In many countries this led to inter-

ethnic conflicts and tensions that have further marginalized some groups, in particular minorities. Transition unleashed competing ethno-nationalist actors without mature national institutions to manage them.

Children and adolescents from certain ethnic and linguistic minorities in the region are suffering from structural discrimination and unequal access to rights and basic services including access to health, education, social protection and justice.

The most vulnerable groups, such as the Roma³, are often affected by multiple, overlapping and intersecting deprivations and rights violations. These violations mark all phases of childhood and adolescence and continue into adult life which in many cases perpetuates inter-generational cycles of exclusion and poverty.

In the region, the most vulnerable and excluded groups reportedly include the Roma, Kurds and Yezidis (in Turkey), Uighurs (in Kazakhstan), Talysh (in Azerbaijan), Pamiris (in Tajikistan), Uzbeks (in Kyrgyzstan) and some indigenous groups in remote areas of the Arctic region.⁴ There is a fairly comprehensive picture of the situation of Roma children in South Eastern European countries but insufficient data and analysis on Roma children in Belarus, Ukraine and the Southern Caucasus.

¹ The information contained in this brief is based on the draft report "Rapid Review on Inclusion and Gender", UNICEF Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS), forthcoming.

² The region spans 21 countries and one territory: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Romania, the Russian Federation (no UNICEF office in country), Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

³ The term "Roma" used by the Council of Europe refers to Roma, Sinti, Kale and related groups in Europe, including Travellers and the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom), and covers the wide diversity of the groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as Gypsies.

⁴ Minority Rights Group 2013.

“Without birth registration and identity documents some children from minority groups face obstacles in accessing rights and basic services.”

Some reports point to the high vulnerability of Central Asian minorities who share Roma roots (“Dom”, “Mugat” and “Djugi”), especially women and children lacking the necessary identification documents to access rights and basic services.

The lack of reliable and disaggregated data on minority communities, especially children, young people and women, hinders the development of effective social inclusion policies.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child protects every child regardless of their race language, national or ethnic background. It specifically highlights the rights of minority or indigenous children to learn about and practice their own culture, language and religion. State Parties have obligations to respect the provisions of the Convention in their policies and actions toward each and every child within their jurisdiction.

How many children?

The population belonging to minority groups in the region is estimated to be about 63 million. According to census data, minority populations on average amount to 21.6 per cent of the total population in each country while the percentage varies significantly between countries. Especially in the Central Asian countries, there is a lack of robust data on minorities.

No reliable data are available on the number of children and adolescents from the many minority groups that live in the region. Roma are among the biggest groups of minorities in the region and their number is usually underreported in censuses as they tend not to self-declare due to fear of discrimination.

Close to half of the Roma population are children and adolescents - 3.5 million (46 per cent) out of an estimated number of 7.7 million.

What are the main challenges and opportunities?

In functioning multi-cultural societies children and adolescents from ethnic and linguistic minorities are able to enjoy equal rights and opportunities, can participate in society and benefit from cultural diversity. However, in many societies children from vulnerable ethnic and linguistic minority groups are affected by multiple violations of their rights often based on a combination of their socio-economic status and discrimination and stigma that they are facing from society. Among the most vulnerable are children and adolescents who are affected by multiple overlapping and intersecting disadvantages (e.g. a trafficked Roma girl with disabilities forced to beg on the streets).

Children from minority communities often grow up in poor socio-economic conditions and are not able to realize their rights to access adequate nutrition, housing and water/sanitary facilities and health services. They are often not able to benefit from early childhood development and education opportunities. Opportunities for education in the mother tongue are often limited and, if available, of low quality as teaching and learning materials in minority languages are scarce. These combined deprivations harm children’s physical, psycho-social and cognitive development and limit their future opportunities. One of the indicators is the high rate of stunted Roma children (up to 25 per cent) in South-Eastern Europe.

Without birth registration and identity documents some children from minority groups face obstacles in accessing rights and basic services, including social, health care and child protection. This makes them particularly vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation, including child labour. Roma children are also overrepresented in institutional care, including in institutions specifically for children with disabilities. Structural discrimination and stigmatization by public service providers and law enforcement authorities

“Progress can be made [through] explicit but not exclusive interventions addressing the deprivation and exclusion of minority groups.”

contribute to the lack of access to services and to the justice system by children from minority groups thereby further cementing their social exclusion. Low school enrolment rates starting from preschool, negative attitudes by education professionals and school segregation particularly affect Roma children, but not exclusively. Compounded by traditional practices such as early marriage this leads to very low secondary school completion rates particularly of Roma girls – as low as 17 percent in some countries in South-Eastern Europe. Early childbirth in many cases perpetuates the inter-generational cycle of poverty and exclusion.

The underlying causes are discrimination due to deeply rooted social norms, lack of implementation of legislation and policies to ensure that all children can access services, language barriers and harmful cultural practices including child marriage. But there are also examples that progress can be made in improving the situation of children and adolescents from minority groups such as the Roma. In some countries and contexts governments have shown strong commitment to ensure respect for human rights, and together with other national and local actors, have made services more inclusive and introduced explicit but not exclusive interventions to address the deprivation and exclusion of Roma. As a result, in recent years, child and maternal mortality rates in Roma communities have been reduced, nearly all births now take place in public health facilities in the presence of skilled birth attendants. Breastfeeding rates of Roma women are often higher than the national average.

What UNICEF does to support countries to realize the rights of ALL children

UNICEF works with governments and many other partners in a number of countries to support the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of legislation and policies aimed at

realizing the rights of children and adolescents from minority groups. A particular focus so far has been on Roma children. Key interventions include:

- **Support the collection of data and monitor** the situation of children from ethnic and linguistic minorities.
- **Document and analyze** the situation and equity gaps affecting children from ethnic and linguistic minorities.
- **Be the voice for children** by communicating and advocating on the issue and convening and mobilizing action by all stakeholders.
- **Develop models for and pilot integrated, community-based outreach services** that identify and support the most vulnerable families and their children.
- **Provide technical advice to national and local authorities** to promote development of integrated, quality services for disadvantaged children and increase their access to services.
- **Promote dialogue to change social norms** by providing positive images of social inclusion and role models to address discrimination and empower children and adolescents.
- **Facilitate national dialogue** between government and civil society organizations focusing on the rights of children from minority groups.
- **Foster exchange of knowledge** on promising practises for social inclusion of children from ethnic and linguistic minorities.
- **Partner with key actors** including international and regional organisations, to ensure that the rights of children from ethnic and linguistic minorities are prioritized.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES IN THE REGION

- **Collect and analyze data** and ensure that it feeds into **evidence-based policies** for social inclusion of children from ethnic and linguistic minorities.
- Put **human rights, non-discrimination, equality of opportunities** at the centre of all minority inclusion policies.
- Develop policies aiming at **explicit but not exclusive targeting** which focus on minority groups, while not excluding others in similar socio-economic circumstances.
- Engage the **mainstream** of society with policies which aim to include minorities in society, overcome segregations and promote intercultural exchanges.
- Promote **gender-sensitive approaches to inclusion** which take into account the specific needs and circumstances of girls and women from minority groups.
- Involve **local authorities and civil society** and ensure **active participation of minority groups** to design, plan, implement and evaluate minority inclusion policies.
- **Prioritize action** in the following areas:
 - invest in the early years of a child;
 - promote quality inclusive early childhood education and learning with attention to education in the mother-tongue;
 - ensure quality and inclusiveness of primary and secondary education, particularly for girls and women;
 - facilitate access for girls and women to quality, inclusive social, health and protection services and information;
 - address material deprivation and income poverty, in particular affecting girls and women;
 - support community development and empowerment of children and adolescents and address stigma and discrimination.
- **Promote global citizenship and human rights through the education system.**



UNICEF promotes the rights and wellbeing of every child, in everything we do. Together with our partners, we work in 190 countries and territories to translate that commitment into practical action, focusing special effort on reaching the most vulnerable and excluded children, to the benefit of all children, everywhere.

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