UNICEF and partners in action

UNICEF supports governments, civil society and other partners in the realization of children’s rights. Some of the key issues on our agenda in the European Neighbourhood East countries include access to justice, child care reform, social protection, inclusive education, disaster risk reduction and HIV prevention and care.

Access to justice

UNICEF supports governments in adjusting justice systems to the rights of children in conflict with the law, child victims and witnesses of crime and children parties to civil and administrative proceedings. We promote equitable access to justice for children to seek redress for violations of their rights and to challenge decisions such as denial of social entitlements or family separation. In the area of juvenile justice, UNICEF focuses on promoting a constructive, tailored response for each child, in which deprivation of liberty is a last resort and re-socialization the ultimate aim. Our work across the region includes supporting legislative and policy reform, building institutional and professional capacity and promoting support services and legal aid. As a result of this work and of the partnerships involved, including with the EU, children are better treated by justice systems and detention rates are decreasing in many countries.

Child care reform

All six governments and many civil society organizations have joined a growing movement to end placing children aged under 3 years in institutions and promote a community-based child care reform. UNICEF support includes technical advice in case management models of social services and deepening civil society and governments’ collaboration in responding to the needs of the most marginalized children.

Social protection

UNICEF has a strong record of engagement with the EU, national governments and other actors in advocating for social protection. UNICEF fostered a policy dialogue with the government and civil society of Ukraine to better align current social protection services with the needs of its people. National reforms of social services supported by the EU-UNICEF partnership are now underway. In Armenia, UNICEF works to help children left behind by migrant families, integrating these interventions with the reform of the social protection system, and also supports the design, implementation and evaluation for integrated social services. In Moldova, UNICEF supported the Government in establishing a programme of Roma Community implementation and evaluation for integrated social services. In Moldova, UNICEF has supported by the EU-UNICEF partnership are now underway. In Armenia, UNICEF supports governments in adjusting justice systems to the rights of children in conflict with the law, child victims and witnesses of crime and children parties to civil and administrative proceedings. We promote equitable access to justice for children to seek redress for violations of their rights and to challenge decisions such as denial of social entitlements or family separation. In the area of juvenile justice, UNICEF focuses on promoting a constructive, tailored response for each child, in which deprivation of liberty is a last resort and re-socialization the ultimate aim. Our work across the region includes supporting legislative and policy reform, building institutional and professional capacity and promoting support services and legal aid. As a result of this work and of the partnerships involved, including with the EU, children are better treated by justice systems and detention rates are decreasing in many countries.

UNICEF and the EU have called for more inclusive and quality education in the European Neighbourhood East countries in order to reach the most marginalized groups of children. Important progress has since been made in all countries in which pre-primary and primary education is becoming more inclusive and of improved quality. While the barriers remain high for children with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups, a Ministerial Education Conference held in Turkey in 2013 saw Europe’s Eastern Neighbours renew their commitment to accelerate progress to closing the equity gaps in children’s access to education.

Inclusive education

UNICEF promotes the rights and well-being of every child with a special focus on reaching those in greatest need.
Unfinished business

Progress has been made in realizing the rights of the 14.6 million children in the European Neighbourhood East countries*. In the last decades, child mortality has dropped more than 50 per cent. Once perceived as a viable alternative, the placement of children in residential institutions is no longer viewed as the best option for protecting the most vulnerable children. The rates of detention of children in conflict with the law have also been decreasing in most countries.

However, improved national averages are masking the exclusion of too many children in the European Neighbourhood East who are denied their basic rights. This is worrying news for the almost 5 million children who are born across these six countries every year. Among the most vulnerable are children with disabilities, children affected by migration, children of ethnic and linguistic minorities, particularly Roma children, and, in many cases, girls. Their situations are exacerbated by poverty and exclusion.

Children with disabilities face major disadvantages and are often hidden from society, many never entering school. They constitute up to 30-50 per cent of children placed in residential institutions, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and limiting their development and potential for future achievement.

Although standards of life of the overall population have increased, child poverty remains a serious concern, particularly for children from disadvantaged groups.

- Access to basic health care, particularly immunization, is a major concern in the European Neighbourhood East. Justice systems are not adapted to children, generating further harm rather than redress. Ensuring children’s access to justice will be essential to realize basic human rights and enforce the rule of law for future generations of Europe’s Eastern neighbours.

- Many children still do not have equal access to quality education in the European Neighbourhood East countries, with around half a million children out of basic education. Considerable gaps in access to quality education persist between marginalized children and their more advantaged peers, such as Roma and non-Roma, and rural- and urban-dwelling children. School dropout is also a significant issue, with early marriage identified by youth in some countries to be one of the main causes.

- The HIV epidemic continues to spread. Ukraine has seen a threefold increase in HIV infections in the last decade - the highest in Europe - with the most vulnerable unable to access the services they need. Up to 25 per cent of adolescents living on the streets are estimated to be HIV positive. Co-infection of HIV with tuberculosis and viral hepatitis is also a common issue.

UNICEF’s role

Weak legislation and policies in the region are often the cause of inefficiencies in systems and institutions, and a lack of transparency and accountability. Capacity gaps, shortages of skilled professionals and limited resources for children further exacerbate the situations of marginalized children, severely limiting their prospects for meaningful engagement with society in later life. Intolerant attitudes within many countries further obstruct the inclusion of all children in society.

These issues are complex and intertwined, and represent major challenges to the social and economic development, and stability of the wider region. Supporting the inclusion of every child is therefore a priority as Europe’s neighbours become more closely aligned with the EU.

UNICEF’s contribution is to generate and share knowledge, strengthen institutions and mobilize key actors to close the existing gaps. We provide policy and technical advice based on evidence, validated and tested models. We evaluate innovations, strengthen child rights monitoring institutions, leverage resources, and convene state and non-state actors around child rights. We remain an independent voice for children. While we do not provide major funding, we support countries to better translate their commitments into concrete results that reach every child.

We aspire to achieve transnational, sustainable solutions by working with governments and parliamentarians, UN agencies, civil society organizations and other partners. We are further deepening our engagement with civil society organizations, helping them to influence policies and decision-making processes more effectively. Our ambition is to get the region talking and working together, and sharing experiences to build a society fit for all children – a society that is prosperous, inclusive and sustainable, where the rights of all children are realized.

Our 10-point agenda for action

1. A child’s right to health: “A promise renewed”
   Addressing gaps in access to health services that have resulted in disparities in child mortality, immunization and nutrition between and within countries.

2. A child’s right to a supportive and caring family environment
   Preventing the placement of children in institutions, which can perpetuate exclusion, vulnerability and inequity, rather than protect children.

3. A child’s right to access justice
   Supporting access to justice for children who wish to claim redress for violations of their rights, child offenders, victims and witnesses of crime and children parties to civil and administrative proceedings.

4. A child’s right to early learning
   Increasing access for all children to preschool education, especially children living in rural areas or living in poverty, children with disabilities and children of ethnic minorities.

5. A child’s right to an inclusive quality education
   Including all children in quality learning, especially children living in rural areas or living in poverty, children with disabilities and children of ethnic minorities.

6. A child’s right to be born free of HIV
   Addressing the social inequalities, service access barriers and stigma that are preventing vulnerable mothers and young people from accessing prevention and treatment of HIV.

7. A young child’s right to comprehensive well-being
   Promoting every child’s right to their full potential through early childhood education and care.

8. A child’s right to social protection
   Improving the effectiveness and efficiency of social protection systems and programmes so that they are more inclusive and child poverty and deprivation may be reduced.

9. A child’s right to protection from the risks of disasters
   Reducing the vulnerability and increasing the resilience of all children to disasters associated with natural hazards and climate change.

10. An adolescent child’s right to equal opportunities, inclusion and second chances
    Engaging with teenagers most at risk of going ‘off track’ in their second decade of life by early detection of vulnerabilities, provision of supportive services, and keeping them in school.

* The Eastern European Neighbourhood countries where UNICEF is present include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.