Context
The introduction of new education policies and initiatives over the past decade has yielded notable improvements in the national schooling system in Serbia. Greater efforts to reduce inequities between populations will further Serbia’s aim of meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

Impact of economic crisis
While neighbouring nations were severely affected by the global economic crisis, the impact on Serbia’s financial sector was less severe, although external investments declined and end-of-year inflation was around 10 per cent. Of greatest concern is the nation’s reliance on international capital inflow due to increasing debt. Given the current international economic downturn, it is less likely that funding will be available, which could pose problems in the near future for Serbia.

After real growth of 5.5 per cent in 2007 and 6.9 per cent in 2008, Serbia’s GDP (PPP) per capita declined by 3 per cent in 2009 to US$10,400. The nation’s GDP is also on the low side for the Central and Eastern Europe subregion, at $9,830 (PPP). Income inequality is relatively low in Serbia but slowly increasing, with a current Gini coefficient of 0.26, which is below many neighbouring states. On the Human Development Index, Serbia ranks 67 out of 182, with a score of 0.826.

Living standards in Serbia remain low for many families. As of 2008, 7.9 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line. The 18.8 per cent unemployment rate in Serbia is among the highest in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEECIS). Women are five times more likely than men to be without work. Youth unemployment remains a particular concern; 43.7 per cent of young people (40.7 per cent of men and 48.3 per cent of women) are without work. Over 80 per cent of Serbians who are unemployed have been out of work for over one year. Food prices are rising, directly affecting the living standards of the Serbian people.

Education reforms
Key education reform initiatives include:
- In 2004, the Law on the Foundation of the Education System was amended. The new Ministry of Education (MoE) distinguished the law from previous amendments, saying it would “provide a systematic, rational, and gradual approach towards the changes in the education system, capturing

Quick Facts about education in Serbia

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<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>7.3 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP spent on education</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gross enrolment in pre-primary school, 2008</td>
<td>98%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net enrolment in primary school, 2008</td>
<td>95%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net enrolment in secondary school, 2008</td>
<td>88%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gross enrolment in tertiary enrolment, 2007(GPI)</td>
<td>48%</td>
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<td>Student/teacher ratio, 2005</td>
<td>13:1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Out-of-school children (% girls)</td>
<td>12,000 (47%)</td>
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<td>Number of refugees and internally displaced persons of concern</td>
<td>250,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>PISA scores: mathematics, reading, science (global rank)</td>
<td>435, (12), 401 (13), 436 (11)</td>
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the overall process, from the beginning to the
completion of education, and not only parts of
the process, which characterizes the existing law.”
• In 2006, the National Education Council was
appointed by the Serbian Parliament as the highest
body for education development and quality as-
surance.
• Commencing in 2006/2007, the Preparatory Pre-
school Programme became compulsory for the
year prior to primary school.
• In 2008, UNICEF signed a Memorandum of Un-
derstanding with the Ministry of Labour and So-
cial Policy with four strategic goals addressing
children with special needs: to transform resi-
dential institutions, to establish new standards
for accountability and protection of child rights,
to decentralize support services for families and
children, and to establish a foster care system
for boys and girls with disabilities.
• The MoE allocated 1.4 million euros to A Child’s
Place is Within the Family, a UNICEF initiative to
support deinstitutionalization.
• In August 2009, Serbia adopted the Law on Foun-
dations of the Education System, which provides
a basis for inclusive education. The new provi-
sions came into practice in the 2010/2011 school
year. The aim is to provide equitable opportuni-
ties for all children, specifically those who are
marginalized, economically disadvantaged, eth-
ic or linguistic minorities, disabled, internally
placed or living in itinerant communities.
• In November 2009, a new Law on Preschool Edu-
cation was introduced. The law prioritized kin-
dergarten enrolment for children from marginal-
ized groups, which emphasizes the compensa-
tory role of preschools for children who do not
have adequate opportunities at home.
• Thirty percent of teachers are trained in child-
centred education, where the focus is on active
teaching/learning methods. The aim is to train
all teachers so that child-centred instruction be-
comes the principal method of delivery.

A “School without Violence” (SwV) initiative has
been implemented across the nation. The pro-
gramme has increased awareness, shifted attitudes
towards violence, and yielded safer school environ-
ments. The programme includes the development of
plans for crisis situations, a parent’s manual and the
promotion of fair play in sports and entertainment.

Access
Early childhood education
According to UNICEF Serbia, the gross enrolment
rate (GER) for preschool education (for children
from 3 to 5 years) is 98 per cent, though large dis-
crepancies emerge when disaggregating the data by
geographical area. For example, access is 100 per
cent in Vojvodina, but drops as low as 33 per cent in
some municipalities in eastern Serbia, according to
the Serbian Ministry of Education. Similarly, ethnic-
ity and geography sharply skews educational access:
only 4 per cent of Roma children and 7 per cent of
rural children are enrolled in preschool. Teacher

Figure 1. Net enrolment rates in Serbia and CEE, 2005
and 2007

Educational challenges facing youth and adolescents
Many young people in Serbia are unsure about
the value of completing education. Severe unem-
ployment among this generation increases risky
activity, low self-esteem and high interest in mi-
gration. The increasing violence and high rate of
drug use (one out of every five youth in Serbia
reports having a friend who uses drugs) are re-
sponses to these realities.

Equity
Greater efforts to address equity issues in Serbia
are needed. Two primary equity issues demand
immediate attention: the gap between rural/urban
attendance, and the wide disparities between the
retention and achievement of Roma children and
children with disabilities.

In Serbia, a large gap remains between rural and
urban enrolment (see Figure 2). Urban access is
significantly greater than rural, with enrolment
decreasing to 81.2 per cent in rural municipalities,
while some urban schools hold multiple shifts of classes each day to accommodate the large numbers of students. In remote areas, multi-age classes are often created to accommodate small class size, and some students commute substantial distances to attend school. A lack of qualified teachers in remote areas is also a concern and often hinders educational quality. In some areas, achievement levels of rural students lag by a whole year compared to their in-town peers.

While Serbia has essentially eliminated gender disparities in primary education – 99 per cent of boys and 99.1 per cent of girls attend primary school – a gender gap favouring girls remains in secondary school. Nationally, 88.9 per cent of girls attend secondary school, compared to 82.4 per cent of boys. This reverse gender gap is larger in rural areas, where only 76.5 per cent of boys attend secondary school, compared to 82.2 per cent of girls. This gap could be explained by boys having greater access to the labour force. Interestingly, in remote villages, the drop-out rates after primary school are higher for girls than boys. This is likely due to parents’ unease over young girls travelling long distances to and from school each day.

Children with disabilities
The Law on the Basis of the Education System, adopted in August 2009, reinforces a political commitment to provide inclusive national education. While adequate resources and regulations recognize the importance of inclusion, much more effort is required to change practices, behaviours and attitudes in Serbia. Currently, only 1 per cent of children special-needs have access to pre-primary education. At other educational levels, many children are hidden due to stigmas associated with their disabilities. Children with disabilities are also more likely than non-disabled peers to drop out of school. Special schools accommodate 15 per cent of students. Students with disabilities who are not at special schools are mainstreamed into regular schools where they receive minimal accommodations. There is no possibility for a student to transfer from a special facility to a mainstream school. Physical access and facilities for children with physical impediments are scarce as well.

Roma education
The most significant equity gap in education continues to be the divide between Roma and non-Roma children. For every four non-Roma children who go to primary school in Serbia, only three Roma children attend. By adolescence, only 10 per cent of Roma children attend school, compared with 86 per cent of the non-Roma population. Additionally, according to UNESCO, approximately 80 per cent of Roma children are placed in special schools for children with ‘mild mental problems’, which is extremely disproportionate considering that only 2 per cent of the population is Roma. Anti-discrimination laws are now in place, but change is slow.

In 2008, Serbia took over the presidency of the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015. Under the Serbian presidency, the following priorities were established: the right to education, fostering inclusion, monitoring Decade goals and developing the European framework for Roma inclusion.

Learning outcomes and quality
Serbia’s low performance on international assessments reopened the dialogue on school quality. Aside from the international measurements, little data is available on internal school processes in Serbia, yet with such low learning outcomes, it is apparent that school efficiency remains poor.

On the Trends in Mathematics and Science Survey (TIMSS) 2003, Serbia performed above the international average in mathematics, and it scored 8th out of the 12 participating countries in the region. In science, Serbia scored below the international average and third to last in the region (see Figure 3).
Serbia scored 12th overall out of 19 participating countries in the region in reading, mathematics and science on PISA 2009 (see Figure 4). Its performance did not change notably since PISA 2006.

Other issues, some of which are being addressed by the MoE, include teacher preparation, internal assessments and drop-out rates. Although Active Learning is endorsed by about 60 per cent of teachers in the system, outdated Yugoslav rote learning continues to persist in many schools. An official assessment carried out in 2005 revealed higher motivation in teachers and students. It also showed improved social and critical thinking skills in children. While it is too early to detect significant changes in achievement, improved education outcomes are predicted. Serbia still lacks an efficient system within the MoE to support and monitor the implementation of new programmes. In addition, it would benefit from implementing an internal information system. This is a significant obstacle for monitoring, planning and improving the current system. A lack of libraries in Serbian schools also hinders learning and exposure to knowledge. Another indicator of low educational quality is the high drop-out rates – around 20 per cent nationally – with the highest percentage in secondary school.

The school system has not adequately taken into account the psychosocial needs of children emerging from conflict. Children and youth over the age of eight lived through almost a decade of brutal war, and many experienced horrific violence. Many of those children, now on the verge of adulthood, are in need of counselling and psychosocial support. In addition, the education system can play a vital role in helping to prevent future violence.

Finally, students require improved safety and school conditions in order to reach their highest potential. The MoE’s efforts to prevent and reduce violence in schools have yielded positive gains, but unsafe drinking water and unsanitary restrooms continue to be an issue in many schools.

Education financing

In 2008, the Government of Serbia spent 4.5 per cent of its GDP on education, an increase from 2005 when only 3.5 per cent was allotted. The budget was reduced in 2009 to 3.8 per cent. The MoE is under constant pressure to optimize expenditures without jeopardizing service delivery. Ninety percent of the education budget continues to go toward paying teachers’ salaries, although the amount remains inadequate and below regional standards. The remaining 10 per cent of the budget is allocated to equipment purchases and emergency school repairs. Municipal budgets fund professional development, school maintenance and supplies, so teachers in municipalities have limited training to update their skills.

Educational priorities in Serbia

While there remain many challenges in Serbia, the government is currently focused on the following priorities:

- Increase school readiness by focusing on pre-primary education and the Preparatory Pre-school Programme
- Increase educational access and quality of education for Roma and other socially-excluded children at all levels
- Implement legislation to further develop inclusion programmes and plans for individual assistance to children in need of special support (such as Roma, children with disabilities, and children from socially deprived groups)
- Optimize school networks and introduce a per capita funding formula to enable the best possible use of funds and ensure equity in education
- Improve secondary school enrolment and retention rates
- Pay particular attention to teaching-learning methodology and the expansion of active learning child-centred education and school community cooperation, reduction of school violence and the improvement of school sanitation
- Analyse the reasons for secondary school drop-outs and develop measures to improve school retention and continuation of education
- Ensure second-chance education of adequate quality for children who dropped out or have never enrolled in school