



MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

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About this newsletter

In January 2021, UNICEF, in partnership with the European Union (EU), launched a two-year programme to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of children and families in the Western Balkans and Turkey. EU funding of €5 million is enabling UNICEF to ensure that quality core services for health, learning, child protection, and early childhood development (ECD) remain accessible for 490,000 of the region's most disadvantaged children – now and beyond the pandemic.

This newsletter provides key highlights from the ongoing work in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*¹, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey during the first nine months of programme implementation.



Health and Nutrition

Strengthening continuity of health and nutrition services and capacity of health service professionals
Page 2

Child Protection

Strengthening continuity of child protection services and capacity of social service professionals
Page 4



Education

Strengthening continuity of education services and the capacity of teachers
Page 5

Early Childhood Development

Strengthening continuity of ECD services and the capacity of ECD professionals
Page 6



¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo* declaration of independence

Why this programme is needed

In 2020 and early 2021, governments across the Western Balkans and Turkey imposed lockdowns and other restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19. The sudden and profound disruption to social and economic life set back decades of progress in poverty reduction and access to quality education and essential health and social services.

More families are falling below the poverty line. Many children missed their routine vaccinations, and millions fell behind in school. Prolonged confinement intensified family stress. During and beyond pandemic times, children's wellbeing depends on functioning public services.

Government measures to protect economies are slowly gaining momentum, and the COVID-19 vaccine rollout is accelerating recovery. However, the future is far from certain, and by September 2021, new waves of infection threatened countries.

Children, especially those whose families are poor, marginalized, or in already precarious situations, will suffer the most devastating impacts from COVID-19. The EU-UNICEF partnership aims to protect nearly half a million children from the pandemic's worst impacts and ensure the systems they depend on are strengthened and more resilient to future shocks and crises.



UNICEF Albania Country Representative, Roberto De Bernardi and Head of Cooperation at the EU Delegation, Hubert Perr, deliver protective personal equipment to a health centre in Durres.

Strengthen the continuity of essential health and nutrition services and the capacity of health service professionals



Preliminary findings of a UNICEF analysis on the impacts of the pandemic on maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition in the Europe and Central Asia region confirmed mild to moderate disruptions in antenatal care and support for young child feeding, breastfeeding, maternal nutrition, and child growth monitoring programmes. The general public's fear of contracting the virus in health facilities also discouraged many families from accessing preventive health care services.

Through the EU-UNICEF partnership, public awareness-raising campaigns, capacity building of health professionals, and systems improvements contributed to enhanced programming for young child health and development. For example:

Catch-up immunization campaigns

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina** developed and rolled out **catch-up immunization** plans. The intensive efforts helped ensure that 450 children under five in Gorazde canton received their missed immunizations.



With support from the EU-UNICEF programme, cold chain assessments in readiness for COVID-19 and routine immunization vaccines were completed. Rehabilitation plans were developed, and the procurement of needed equipment is underway, with additional support from EU4HEALTH and USAID.

- ▶ **Kosovo***. The programme contributes to improved access, coverage, and demand for routine immunization and COVID-19 vaccine among Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. 77 volunteers and youth in 14 municipalities were trained in effective communication and data gathering to support catch-up campaigns. Training of 100 immunization professionals on interpersonal communication for immunization is ongoing.

Support for optimal young child feeding

- ▶ **Albania**. With support from the programme, the Centre for Healthy Childhood is leading the implementation of the Baby-friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) standards in primary health care and maternity hospitals in Shkoder, Vlore, Fler, Kudkes, Berat, and Korce regions. Technical discussions are underway with the Ministry of Health and the National Centre for Quality Control and Accreditation of Health Institutions, for the integration of the WHO-UNICEF standards on breastfeeding into the accreditation of health care facilities.

Provision of personal protective equipment (PPE)

- ▶ **Albania**. Gloves, masks, and gowns were provided to 63 health centres in Durres, Fier, and Elbasan to protect health personnel and patients from COVID-19 infection.

Ensuring the continuation of home visiting services for families with young children

- ▶ **Serbia**. The programme provided support, including mobile phones and internet connectivity, to two primary health centres that introduced remote video [counselling](#) for families with young children via home visiting services. As of September 2021, more than 143 nurses received technical support, training, and quality assurance supervision for video counselling. Legislative amendments to institutionalise online home visiting are underway.
- ▶ **North Macedonia**. Functional analysis of the home visiting (patronage) system is currently being designed to study institutional organization and human capital development. The evidence base will inform future advocacy and strengthen the national home visiting system serving families with young children.

“Parents are happy about being reminded to bring in their children for routine vaccinations. We have reached 80 per cent of children who missed their shots during the pandemic. But we will complete all of them by the end of the year.”

– Azemina Baščelija, a nurse at Goraz Health Centre, Bosnia and Herzegovina



“...(video counselling) was useful for pregnant women because they were the most scared. These video calls were important because they could contact me. They called me individually and I told them what they can expect during and after childbirth.”

– Olivera “Olja”, a visiting nurse in Kikinda, Serbia

Strengthening the continuity of child protection services and capacity of social work and social service professionals



For families, the disruption of routines, social distancing, and prolonged home confinement aggravated the stress brought on by deepening financial insecurity and continued uncertainty. The risk of violence and abuse in the family and online significantly increased. Vulnerable children, already isolated from friends and school, faced a heightened risk of violence at home, especially as access to child protection services became more difficult due to lockdown.

The EU-UNICEF partnership aims to improve the identification and referral of vulnerable children to services, including to mental health and psychosocial support. In the last nine months, UNICEF has supported Western Balkan countries in strengthening child protection systems by enhancing the capacity of helplines and implementing technological solutions to reach more parents and vulnerable children. Capacity building and mental health support for social services professionals include:

Strengthening helplines for children and parents

- ▶ **Albania.** In collaboration with the national child helpline, ALO 116 111, a child-friendly web-based channel and a mobile app were developed, enabling children to report violence, abuse, or exploitation. Since [June](#), 40 cases have been reported through the [Report Now](#) platform. Children and young people also accessed the chat function to find out more about violence prevention, online safety, and reducing COVID-19 risk.
- ▶ **Serbia.** In February, a chatbot and Viber bot app were introduced in collaboration with the [National Children's Line](#) (NADEL), which gave children additional options to report violence and access counselling. Since the introduction of the new channel, NADEL has provided more than 550 chat counselling sessions and responded to 13,200 phone calls. Plans are underway to promote the hotline through existing social, education, and child protection services.
- ▶ **Bosnia and Herzegovina.** Additional staff enabled the national child helpline to increase hours of operation and reach more children with psychosocial support and referral to child protection services. More than 8,550 calls were answered – twice doubling the number in 2020. Reports of violence against children increased by 300 per cent.
- ▶ **Montenegro.** Capacity building efforts raised the quality of mental health counselling and referral for children calling into the [24/7 SOS child phone line](#). Between May and October, the toll-free [helpline on positive parenting](#), supported and promoted through different channels with EU funds, responded to 1,340 calls from parents.



“Every problem is worth talking about. Something that used to be a big problem and that was very difficult to solve is easier after talking to NADEL counsellors.”

– Jelena, a former young NADEL caller, Serbia



“We do not offer instant solutions and we are not here to condemn parents, but to come to a solution together through conversation.”

– Lepa Zunjic, a social worker at SOS parent helpline, Montenegro

- ▶ **Kosovo***. In collaboration with the University of Pristina, a [mapping](#) was initiated on the social impact of the pandemic on children and families. The findings will inform capacity building efforts for the social services workforce.
- ▶ **Turkey**. UNICEF and the Ministry of Family and Social Services are finalizing plans for strengthening mental health and psychosocial support to families and children by telephone.

Expanding support to the most vulnerable children

- ▶ **North Macedonia**. Strengthening of an existing online platform and training support to preschool teachers and social services personnel enabled children with disabilities to access additional opportunities to individualized rehabilitative and special educational support. Through the platform, 80 parents received individual and group counselling.
- ▶ **Albania**. In partnership with the local NGO, Shoqata Kombetare Edukim per Jeten (SHKEJ), children and young people at risk of trafficking, violence, and child labour were reached through a [mobile unit](#) operating in Tirana and Kamza. The initiative offers opportunities to learn about digital literacy and online safety. 100 vulnerable children benefited from psychosocial support.



The SHKEJ mobile team provides psychosocial support and raises online safety awareness among children between 10 and 17 years old in Tirana and Kamza, Albania.

Strengthening the continuity of education services and capacity of teachers



In pre-pandemic times, UNICEF estimated¹ that 1.3 million students in primary and secondary school were not achieving minimum proficiency in basic skills. The COVID-19 emergency worsened learning outcomes for children by disrupting classes for an average of 41 weeks: 50 per cent longer than in other Europe and Central Asia subregions and 30 per cent more than the EU average.²

UNICEF estimated that in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, on average, one child in three does not have access to any form of digital or broadcast remote learning.³ Among children who drop out of school, children with disabilities, minorities, and refugee and migrant children are the most vulnerable, disproportionately represented, and the least likely to return to education.

The EU-UNICEF partnership supports inclusive teaching and learning for all children and is working to improve the quality and effectiveness of the digital learning environment, planning, policy development, and administration. In the past nine months, progress achieved through the EU-UNICEF partnership included:

¹ UNICEF calculation using the most recent UNESCO Institute for Statistics out-of-school data and the most recent UIS and PISA data on minimum proficiency).

² Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, N. Macedonia, and Serbia; no data available for Kosovo*

³ Estimates as of August 2020.



“We cannot force our children to live and learn the way we have been used to. They are the next generation, and we need to follow them. Today, in addition to the classroom teaching and human encounters, we need to learn to handle digital tools, because we live reality in the virtual world.”

– Semira Fočo, a teacher in BiH

- ▶ **Regional level.** The UNICEF Regional Office, in coordination with UNICEF country offices, is strengthening Ministries of Education and other partners to train teacher trainers on new materials starting in November 2021 and integrate ongoing support through experiential learning and communities of practice.

UNICEF is developing a comprehensive resource package that offers a teacher competency framework modelled on EU and UNESCO examples. Teacher training modules are being developed to strengthen formative assessment in digital, distance and blended learning, shift instruction to digital environments, promote technologies that support quality, inclusive learning and pedagogical approaches to digital learning for all children.

Strengthening schools and teacher capacities for quality, inclusive education

- ▶ **Kosovo*.** In four municipalities, a needs assessment of digital infrastructure and digital teaching is underway. ICT and assistive technology were procured and will be distributed to teachers and students in coordination with the Ministry of Education and Science.
- ▶ **Bosnia and Herzegovina.** A needs assessment around digital and blended learning is also underway and will inform follow-up capacity building for teachers.
- ▶ **North Macedonia.** The first national e-library for interactive textbooks was established as part of the Government's free "Eduino" platform. The e-library, accessible to teachers, students, and caregivers, will become a central hub for all digital teaching material including workbooks, and audio resources. Android and Windows app versions allow users to access digital resources even in communities with low connectivity.

Support for safe opening of schools

- ▶ In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, liquid disinfectants enabled the safe reopening of five special education schools in Sarajevo in March 2021.



Cover page of teacher training module.



Page inside an interactive textbook on the Eduino e-library, North Macedonia.

Strengthening the continuity of early childhood development (ECD) services



Early childhood intervention for children with disabilities and developmental difficulties is an emerging policy area across the Western Balkans. However, during the pandemic, preschools and early intervention services were suspended or severely limited. The EU-UNICEF partnership has contributed to the progress and results in several ECD activities and results:

Strengthening support for ECD practitioners

- ▶ **Regional level.** The UNICEF Regional Office is developing an ECD e-learning platform for home visitors and early childhood intervention practitioners. The platform will host digital capacity building courses in multiple languages and can be embedded in existing training opportunities.
- ▶ **Albania.** Guidelines on inclusive education were updated and expanded to preschool level. Ongoing training and mentoring helped to strengthen the competencies of more than 445 pre-primary teachers and school directors from Durrës, Kneza, and Tirana.

Expanding digital solutions in support of parenting and early learning

- ▶ **Regional level.** A UNICEF open-source mobile app is providing guidance on nurturing care to parents of children up to six years old. The app includes a chatbot and games and is being adapted for Kosovo* and North Macedonia.
- ▶ **Montenegro.** The 'ParentChat' programme has reached 50 parents with support and guidance on nurturing care for young children. An additional 100 parents are targeted.
- ▶ **North Macedonia.** The national digital platform "Eduino" for teachers, students, and parents, is being upgraded to ensure access to quality digital early learning resources. A dedicated early childhood education (ECE) section will offer play-based learning materials and ECD-related community engagement activities such as calls for relevant quality digital content.
- ▶ **Kosovo*.** The ECD platform for children up to six years old is being strengthened with gaming features to engage over 5,000 children in learning language and math. Teacher training is ongoing.

Improving services for children with developmental difficulties, including disabilities

- ▶ **Regional level.** A methodology to conduct situational analysis was developed and is being rolled out in Kosovo*, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. The evidence generated will inform future policy work for building cross-sectoral, family-centred systems supporting children with developmental difficulties, including disabilities.
- ▶ **Bosnia and Herzegovina.** International classifications in assessing disability in children are being introduced in selected cantons. To date, 50 professionals have been trained on applying these classifications.
- ▶ **Serbia.** A pilot of a national model for early childhood intervention and building 'paediatricians' capacity to identify children at risk of developmental difficulties and disabilities is ongoing.

To read more, visit us at: <https://www.unicef.org/eca/mitigating-impact-covid-19-children-and-families-western-balkans-and-turkey>



Prototype of the nurturing care app.



Milos Rajkovic, a participant in "ParentChat" programme, playing with his son, in Podgorica, in June 2021.

"The role of father is equally important as the role of mother, and I am giving my best to make my contribution real – this is my motivation for participating in the ParentChat programme."

– Milos Rajkovic, a participant in "ParentChat", Montenegro



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