

# UNEQUAL PROGRESS: CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

Summary of the Situation of Children In Europe And Central Asia



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## UNEQUAL PROGRESS: CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

Despite notable progress many children in the Europe and Central Asia region (ECAR) still live in poverty, lack equal access to quality services, and suffer discrimination, abuse, exploitation and violence.

In 2021, the child population (aged 0-17 years) in each country ranged from 15 per cent (Monaco) to 42 per cent (Tajikistan). The total child population (aged 0-17 years) was 197 million.

Disadvantaged children include those from low-income families and/or ethnic communities, children with disabilities, those living in residential care and detention centres, migrant children, children affected by natural disasters, refugee children, and children in conflict zones. In Ukraine, conflict is having a devastating impact on children. They have witnessed and experienced unimaginable consequences of the war. By December 2022, over 7.2 million children inside and outside Ukraine urgently needed humanitarian assistance.

The UNICEF ECAR 2022 Situation Report shares some of the most up-to-date data that is available about children in the region, highlighting the progress, disparities and challenges as well as the impact of recent events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the refugee and migrant crisis. However, there is a lack of systematic data collection throughout the region despite the Committee on the Rights of the Child recurrent recommendations to improve data collection on children. Countries are also falling behind in reporting on their progress toward attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Of the 54 countries in ECAR, only four have updated data covering the last five years for more than 60 per cent of child-related SDG indicators.

Moreover, although the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure (OPIC-CRC) recognizes that children have the right to appeal to an international mechanism when national mechanisms fail to address violations effectively, out of 22 UNICEF CPD countries, 11 countries have ratified the OPIC-CRC, namely Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, Türkiye, Ukraine, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia.

### About 22 million children in UNICEF CPD countries<sup>1</sup> are living below the national poverty lines

The lack of systematic and consistent data made comparisons across the region difficult,

yet the available data suggests stark inequities. In addition, in 2021, 24 per cent of children (19.6 million) in the European Union were at risk of poverty or social exclusion compared with 21 per cent of adults. The highest proportion of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion was recorded in Romania (42 per cent), Spain (33 per cent) and Bulgaria (33 per cent). Conversely, the lowest proportion was reported in Slovenia (11 per cent), Finland (13 per cent) and Czechia (13 per cent). However, the war in Ukraine and rising inflation have driven millions more children into poverty throughout the region.

Many families have to use significant amounts of their own money to pay for healthcare. High out-of-pocket expenditure (OOPE), a core indicator of health financing systems, can have a catastrophic impact on family income, particularly those who are already poor. The OOPE expenditure ranges between 5 per cent in Monaco and 85 per cent in Armenia.

### Two-thirds of newborn deaths could be prevented during pregnancy, at birth and during the first week of life

The disparities in healthcare for children are vast. Although ECAR includes countries with the lowest number of infant and child deaths globally, the region also has some countries with higher under-five mortality rates than the global average. Moreover, mortality rates vary not only between but also within nations. More than half of deaths among children under five years of age in the region are due to diseases that are preventable and treatable through simple, affordable and proven measures. The leading causes of newborn deaths are prematurity and low birth weight, infections, asphyxia, birth trauma and congenital abnormalities. Two-thirds of newborn deaths could be prevented if well-known and effective health interventions were provided during pregnancy, at birth and during the first week of life.

Inadequate water quality, sanitation and hygiene in some countries in the region also contribute to poor health outcomes. Moreover, contamination of the water used for drinking, hygiene and recreation, including microbial contamination, is a significant concern throughout the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely affected routine immunization services, with coverage dropping in every region worldwide (WHO and UNICEF, 2022), the largest sustained drop in childhood vaccinations in about three decades. Although the ECAR did not

<sup>1</sup> CPD refers to the Country Programme Document, which is approved by the UNICEF Executive Board.

register a dramatic reduction, 95 per cent of countries show backsliding in immunization coverage. As a result, every year, almost 1 million children in the region do not receive their scheduled vaccinations.

### One in three children aged 6-9 years is overweight or obese

Poor nutrition is a major public health concern in the region, particularly childhood overweight and obesity which can result in serious health conditions, such as type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. A considerable proportion of children in many European countries do not meet recommended levels of physical activity (one in three children aged 6-9 are overweight or obese) although data for this indicator are outdated. Over 60 per cent of children who are overweight before puberty will be overweight in early adulthood.

### 7.3 million children at pre-primary, primary and secondary school age in 22 UNICEF CPD countries are out of school

In education, challenges persist. Pre-primary education accounts for 55 per cent of out-of-school children. Addressing early learning is critical as it facilitates entry to and completion of primary and secondary education.

Roma children in Europe are among the most disadvantaged, and face discrimination and exclusion. They are less likely to attend school and are more likely to be over-age relative to their classmates, which often leads to them dropping out at either primary or secondary level without having acquired foundational skills.

Moreover, many young people are not participating in society once they leave school, with almost one-quarter of young people in the region not in education, employment or training.

### Many unaccompanied and separated migrant and refugee children are living in sub-standard reception facilities

Many children are being denied their right to protection. ECAR still has one of the highest rates of children separated from their families and children in residential care worldwide.

Also, in the region, many unaccompanied and separated migrant and refugee children are living in sub-standard reception facilities while others fall through the cracks of the child protection systems.



Violent discipline against children at home is commonplace across the region. The analysis of MICS data in selected countries revealed that boys experienced higher violence than girls, and the type of violence they experienced was different.

Overall, the prevalence of child marriage has remained lower than in most other parts of the world and has become less common across the region since 2000. However, there is a risk that the recent events may increase poverty and social exclusion, which are the main factors contributing to child marriage. The prevalence of child marriage is much higher among the Roma population and has remained consistently high for the past few decades, with more than one-fifth of women getting married or being in a union before the age of 15.

### The region has some of the world's highest adolescent suicide rates

The region has some of the world's highest adolescent suicide rates, particularly for boys and those from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) community. Adolescents and young people from the LGBTQI community face violence, discrimination and rejection for not conforming to dominant social norms. They are more vulnerable to increased health risks owing to a lack of access to appropriate life-skills education and health services.



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### A preference for sons in parts of the region is creating the phenomenon of ‘missing girls’

Discrimination against girls persists, undermining equity and sustainable development. The consequences can be particularly devastating for girls from groups that are already disadvantaged. In extreme cases, the preference for sons over daughters results in sex-selective abortions.

This has led to skewed population sex ratios in some countries. For example, in 2022, Liechtenstein had the highest sex imbalance in births in the world, with 1.163 boys born for every girl; Azerbaijan was in third place with 1.122 boys born for every girl; and Armenia was in seventh place with 1.091. By comparison, the global average was 1.057 boys born for every girl.

### Children with disabilities

Children with disabilities face multiple rights violations, from a lack of early detection or diagnosis of their conditions to being excluded from education and their communities. Those who also belong to another disadvantaged group suffer even more. Across the region, about 11 million children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to stigma and discrimination.

### Children’s Climate Risk Index 2020, ranked some ECAR countries as ‘mid to highly’ vulnerable to climate change

Climate change, environmental degradation, limited access to energy sources, and disasters directly threaten a child’s ability to survive, grow and thrive.

Air pollution within the region is the single most significant environmental risk. It is estimated that 83 per cent of children breathe polluted air - exposed to ambient air pollution (PM2.5)  $\geq 10 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ . Chemical pollution is often localized but may also significantly impact health.

Climate projections show increased risks of floods and landslides throughout the region, particularly in the Western Balkans and Central Asia. Additionally, heat waves are more common.



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Monitoring, forecasting and early warning for natural hazards in the region have improved. Still, they have not been matched sufficiently by disaster risk reduction measures to equip communities with the knowledge and skills they need to protect themselves. Moreover, such measures fail to address the vulnerabilities of children and women, including those with disabilities.