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IN FOCUS: SUPPORTING QUALITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

A quality and inclusive education for every child in Europe and Central Asia

A major transition is underway in education across the Europe and Central Asia Region. Countries are endeavoring to ensure that education systems prepare students to productively contribute to the 21st century’s market economies and democratic political systems, and deliver the promise made to children under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4): a quality education for all, with no child left behind. While almost all countries in the Region have increased their school enrolment rates, there are two key challenges remaining: 1) the lack of access to education for the most marginalized children and adolescents, and 2) the low quality of education.

The millions of children and adolescents missing out on school in the Region often come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, and face pressures such as poverty and discrimination that may curtail their learning. Regarding quality, too many children and adolescents are leaving school without the basic skills they need for employment and productive adult lives. Both of these challenges become more acute as children reach secondary-school age.

UNICEF works with governments and other partners across the Region to ensure that every child is in school and is learning. Our ambition is to have every child in a safe, supportive and inclusive school environment, with no child left behind because of who or where that child is.

“When we arrived in Turkey, the first thing I did was look for a school for my children,” says Leyla Rashid. The Rashid family fled the war in Syria and endured a perilous journey to Turkey.

At first, times were so tough that Leyla thought of sending her 13-year old son out to work, “But he is still a child. He belongs in school,” she said.

Ahmad and his sisters Melek (pictured above at school) and Zeynep are among the more than 400,000 children in Turkey who have benefitted from the expansion of the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) programme. The Government of Turkey initiative is implemented with support from UNICEF and the Turkish Red Crescent and funding from the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO). The CCTE provides vulnerable refugee families with cash payments to support their children’s schooling.

“The children love their school, says Leyla. “I feel very proud every morning when they leave and hopeful every evening when they come back.”

Toward 2030

4 QUALITY EDUCATION



SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Challenges

Equity challenges

Every country in the Region has high enrolment rates for primary and lower-secondary education, yet millions of children and adolescents are not in school. The biggest gaps in enrolment are seen at these two ends of the education spectrum, with 1.3 million children missing out on one year of pre-primary education, and 2 million missing out on secondary school.

The rate of young people aged 15 to 24 who are not in education, employment and training (NEET) ranges from 12 per cent in Belarus, to 42 per cent in Tajikistan, representing a massive loss of potential across the Region.

Out-of-school children tend to be the most disadvantaged who may also be 'invisible' in education data, such as refugee and migrant children, those from ethnic minorities and children with disabilities. These children are often unwelcome in school as a result of negative social norms. In Armenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, 43 and 31 per cent of the population, respectively, believe that children with disabilities should study separately in special schools.

UNICEF estimates that at least 75 per cent of the roughly 5.1 million children living with disabilities in Eastern and Central Europe and Central Asia are excluded from quality, inclusive education. Available evidence shows that millions of children with disabilities are never enrolled in school. For those who do enroll, they are less likely to benefit from learning or complete primary or secondary education. Hundreds of thousands of children with disabilities in the Region remain in 'special' schools, segregated from their peers and communities.

Roma children are also far more likely than others to be out of the classroom, especially at pre-primary or secondary-school age because of discrimination. Refugee and migrant children face a number of challenges to get any education at all, as schools are unprepared to cope with additional students, to help children catch up on schooling they have missed or provide specialized language classes.

Children affected by gender discrimination also face serious problems at secondary level, with boys more likely to be excluded in some countries, and girls in others. For some girls, early marriage puts an end to their schooling. Equally, dropping out of school leaves girls more vulnerable to early marriage. Gender discrimination leaves adolescent girls more likely to be out of school in Tajikistan, Turkey and Roma settlements in the western Balkans, while adolescent boys are more likely to be out of school in Kyrgyzstan. Working children are more likely to abandon secondary schooling.

Violence and school dropout are closely linked with school dropout heightening a child or young person's risk of experiencing violence, exploitation and coming into conflict with the law, while violence at school or at home can lead adolescents to stop going to school.

Quality challenges

There are serious concerns about the quality of education in the Region and whether pupils are learning the skills they need to function and prosper in adult life. There has been little progress over time and data from 2015 confirm a learning crisis, showing that 40 to 70 per cent of 15-year-olds fail to master the most basic skills in reading, mathematics and science in 10 countries and territories in the Region - namely, Albania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania and Turkey. The data also reveal major equity gaps in learning, with the children from the most marginalized groups most likely to miss out. On average, poor children score almost one year behind wealthier children, and those in rural areas lag around two years behind their peers in the big cities.



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Fourteen-year-old Shukrona (second from the right) studies with classmates at Secondary School #89 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Shukrona was born with Cerebral Palsy. She could not attend kindergarten, but now excels at a regular school with classmates her age.

Fast facts

- More than 5 million children in the Region are missing out on an education
- 1.3 million children one year before entering primary school are not in pre-primary education
- 2 million children of primary and lower-secondary age, and an additional 2 million adolescents of upper-secondary age are not in school
- High national averages hide striking disparities in secondary attendance for children from Roma settlements. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, their secondary school attendance rates range from 6 per cent to 38 per cent, while national averages are over 80 per cent
- Up to half of all 15-year-olds in the Region fail to master the most basic skills in reading, mathematics and science
- Wealthier and urban children can be years ahead of poorer and rural children in terms of learning outcomes

There are difficulties in making the shift from curricula that are content-based to those that are competency-based and flexible. Curricular reforms are often ineffective as they are not complemented with adequate reforms in teacher education and learning assessments. While a shift toward child-centred teaching can be seen in many countries, this has not resulted in tangible changes in children's learning. Equally, teacher training reforms are underway in many countries, but these are not yet keeping pace with the latest research and evidence-based practices. Several countries also face a lack of quality learning materials, insufficient involvement of communities and parents, and the robust measurement of learning outcomes.



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Children from a Roma community in Albania attend school alongside their non-Roma peers, in the capital city Tirana.

Our aim

UNICEF works across the Region to ensure that all children are in safe and supportive schools, and receive a quality education. This demands inclusive, high-quality schooling backed by strong education systems.

Our actions

UNICEF builds on its strong and trusted relationships with governments to focus on entire education systems to improve – and where necessary transform – education policies, provision, inclusion and quality. We also support innovative approaches to test and shape vital policy reforms.

UNICEF has been a key player in progress on expanding access to quality pre-schooling, working with partners to help ministries develop policies, and with teachers and communities to deliver good quality pre-schooling. We support governments to develop alternative, low-cost models for early learning the launch-pad for later education. By strengthening early learning for all children aged 3 to 6 through promoting pre-primary education, we help children arrive at primary school ready to make the most of their education.

We aim to make all schools truly inclusive and child-focused, recognizing that the obstacles to children's learning are not the 'fault' of a child's impairment or the language they speak at home, or their poverty, gender or ethnicity, but rather the inability of some schools to include every marginalized child. The work of UNICEF and its partners has helped increase the number of children who have faced challenges to their inclusion attend regular schools. This has been done by providing support to curriculum development, teacher training, personalized learning and the use of assistive technologies.

Key government commitments on education, ratified by the governments of Europe and Central Asia

Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989

- **Article 28** recognizes the right to education and requires all States Parties to make primary education compulsory and available free to all; make secondary education accessible to every child and take measures to encourage regular attendance and reduce drop-out rates, among other provisions.
- **Article 29** requires all States Parties to ensure that education enables children to reach their fullest potential; develops respect for human rights and different cultural identities; and fosters peace and tolerance as well as respect for the natural environment.

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2007

- **Article 24 on inclusive education** Recognizes the right of children with disabilities to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, and ensuring inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to the full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity.
- *Children with disabilities have the right to free and compulsory quality and inclusive education, at all levels, on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live; right to reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements.*
- *Urges state parties to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified and trained, including on disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.*

We support monitoring systems to identify the children who are out of school and those at greatest risk of dropping out. Monitoring is crucial for the development and tracking of policies and programmes to pursue universal school enrolment and completion.

UNICEF also prioritizes the education of children caught in the region's refugee and migrant crises. Our partnership with Turkey's Ministry of National Education, for example, has helped to turn the tide, with more Syrian refugee children in Turkey now in school than out.

We work to reduce school dropouts, which requires good data on all children, their characteristics and their access to services. We support cross-sectoral interventions to address the often complex and overlapping challenges that might lead a child to drop out of school – challenges that are about more than education itself and that often include poverty, discrimination and other pressures.

This helps governments to invest their resources where they are most needed and in approaches that really work.

An unfinished agenda

Inclusive, quality education is not only about policies and schools that support access, learning and participation. It also means re-thinking what and how children learn by reforming the curricula and teacher training, investing in the effective measurement of learning outcomes, improving the availability and quality of learning materials and transforming the school environment.

There is now a pressing need to scale up what works better in the Region, coupled with a focus on how innovation and technology can enhance teaching practices and learning outcomes. UNICEF stands ready to support this effort, building on its decades of experience and results for children and adolescents.

Improving the quality of education in Serbia

The SHARE initiative, backed by UNICEF, supports horizontal learning between 'high' and 'low' performing schools. As part of the pilot, communities of teachers were established and through self-reflection, feedback and peer support, they worked collaboratively to improve teaching and learning. An evaluation of the initiative showed that average student achievements in Mathematics and Serbian language increased by about 10 points. Most importantly, teaching competencies and overall schools climates improved.

Learning for life in Ukraine

A UNICEF-developed model for psychosocial support (PSS) and life-skills education in Ukraine has equipped teachers and psychologists to intervene and help children who are in distress. This has been done through training to enhance teacher-student relationships, parent engagement and referrals for more intensive professional support where necessary. UNICEF has also supported the development of safe schools and life skills based on the concept of 'learning to live together.' Since 2015, 300,000 children across conflict-affected eastern Ukraine have benefited from these programmes, which have helped to reduce disruptive behaviour and foster greater acceptance of children who have been uprooted by the conflict. Many teachers reported that the training was "life changing." The Ministry of Education plans to implement the life-skills education approach across Ukraine.

Increasing Roma children's access to early learning in Albania

An initiative run by UNICEF, the Ministry of Education and Sports, and national civil society organisations has led to a significant increase in the number of young children from Roma communities attending pre-school in Albania. The "Every Roma Child in Preschool" initiative helped educate Roma families on their children's right to access free preschool education, assisted local officials to address cultural barriers and stigma preventing Roma children from attending school and helped strengthen school registration systems. In 2011, only 26 per cent of Roma children aged three to six years old attended preschool, by 2017, the number of children attending had increased to 66 per cent nationally.



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July 2019