KOSOVO CASE

Crisis to opportunity for children - boosting early childhood education and parental involvement in times of COVID-19
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ABSTRACT

Today, as the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of people in Kosovo unravel, children, particularly from vulnerable groups, emerge as one of the most affected groups. Prior to COVID-19, Kosovo had one of the lowest enrollment rates of children 0-6 years old in preschool education in western Balkans. This case study presents actions undertaken by UNICEF and its partners to translate COVID-19 crisis into an opportunity for preschool-aged children in Kosovo. UNICEF in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and Save the Children designed and launched the first digital Early Childhood Development (ECD) platform for children 0-6 years old in Kosovo in response to COVID-19. With above 2.3 million visitors over a two-months period, the ECD platform has been positioned as a credible source for content and instructions for engagement of parents with their children in development and play-based learning activities at home.

KOSOVO CONTEXT

Today, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, child development and education is undergoing an even more acute crisis as schools are closed, affecting 1.6 billion children worldwide. This compares to 353,454 children in Kosovo, with around 180,000 young children left with limited or no access to services or early education. Deprivation from learning opportunities at nurseries, kindergartens and schools requires that parents utilize alternative means such as digital books, direct engagement and technological tools to support learning at home. Yet, more than half of children under the age of 5 in Kosovo have no children’s books at home, and only 42 per cent of mothers and 6 per cent of fathers engage in any learning activities with children at home. Further, 5 per cent of private kindergartens are licensed, and overall funding dedicated to early childhood education and development is limited to 0.3 per cent of Kosovo’s GDP for preschool and pre-primary levels. Only 14 percent of children aged 3-5 years attend an early childhood education programme, leaving a large portion of children of this age deprived of early learning programmes.

*All references to Kosovo shall be understood under UNSCR 1244
To ensure continuity in learning and increase parental involvement in learning activities with children, UNICEF Kosovo Office in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and Save the Children designed and launched the first digital ECD platform for children aged 0-6 years in Kosovo. The development and launching of the platform were accomplished in a record time of two weeks, following the intense engagement of the team composed of MES, UNICEF, Save the Children, the software development company, and ECD experts compiling core activities for children.

Addressing the critical developmental needs of children 0-6 called for immediate communication between MESTI and key development partners in Kosovo amid the pandemic. In response to this call and with a commitment to enhance ECD in Kosovo and apply innovation to achieve results for children, UNICEF Kosovo spearheaded the initiative for developing a designated platform for early childhood development and education. This platform primarily aimed to provide emergency support for children, parents, and educators during the social isolation measures. However, to achieve greater impact on early childhood development outcomes beyond the pandemic, the developing team defined four key objectives of the platform:

1. To provide a free and easily accessible digital tool that promotes the importance of Early Childhood Development and Education (ECD/E) beyond the COVID-19 pandemic;
2. To elevate parental engagement in activities that spur ECD/E for children to reach their full potential;
3. To provide a platform for teachers and educators for guiding and engaging with parents and children, developing interactive activities;
4. To set a reporting and monitoring tool for educators – in order to track ECD/E progress across Kosovo.

* https://edukimihershem.rks-gov.net
2. Software and content development

To accelerate the development of the platform, the core working group was established, comprising of the MEST representative for preschool education, UNICEF ECD team, child development experts, and representatives of software development company - ODK. Save the Children in Kosovo was also involved in supporting the team to develop activities for children. Assembled within a week after the call of MEST, the working group followed an intensive working routine that comprised of three main phases:

Design and development – The software development was facilitated by the non-governmental organization – Open Data Kosovo (ODK), contracted by UNICEF Kosovo Office. Over the course of two weeks, the navigation map, layout of menus, and design of the platform were continually upgraded to meet the needs of children, parents and educators during the emergency period and post-COVID-19 period.

Content creation – To address the wholistic development of children and ease the burden placed on parents during the pandemic, two child development experts developed daily activities for children in four main age-groups: 0-3, 3-4, 4-5, and 5-6 years old. Each activity involves a set of actions to be accomplished using materials found at home and targeting the motoric, socio-emotional, and cognitive development of children. Besides the activities, the platform integrated a dedicated section for COVID-19 related prevention and protection measures, good parenting resources for early childhood, showcase of videos and pictures sent by parents, and a corner for parents to address questions to experts. In addition, digital reporting formats were created for educators to aid data collection, monitoring and analysis of performance for the preschool and pre-primary service providers in the public and private sector in Kosovo.
Launching and promotion: Within two weeks, the ECD platform “Distance Education – Care, Development and Education during early childhood for ages 0-6” was ready for launching. To assure all parents and educators received the information, MES sent 1.8 million notification messages via SMS, reaching all citizens of Kosovo while a short informative video was launched in the national TV stations. The Minister of Education and the Chair of Kosovo Parliament promoted the importance and benefits of the newly established ECD platform through their social media accounts. The platform has also been translated into four (4) in languages, Albanian, Serbian, Roma, and Turkish, to promote uptake and engagement of all communities living in Kosovo. Generated user statistics reveal that the audience of the platform extends to North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, as well as diaspora users in the US, Switzerland and many more countries.

RAPID ASSESSMENT OF ECD PLATFORM

Engaging parents and enhancing early childhood development

Aim and Method: To obtain information on the usefulness of ECD platform on enhancing developmental domains of children and engagement level of parents, an online rapid assessment was conducted with parents who use the ECD platform. The selection of parents was performed randomly by 4 educators employed in community based ECD centers established by UNICEF. The educators remained in contact with parents of children enrolled in the ECD centers throughout the COVID-19 imposed facility closures, utilizing digital communication tools (i.e. WhatsApp) to provide instructions for implementing activities posted on the platform.
The rapid assessment form was developed by UNICEF and distributed to 90 parents, while a total of 76 parents completed the survey (a response rate of 84%). Data collection approach was in the form of self-reporting, and the exercise was undertaken for a period of three days. A total of 11 questions, framed in 5-Point Likert Scale and narrative format addressed the following 4 main themes: user-friendliness, involvement of parents in activities, attractiveness of activities to children and parents, and impact on children’s motoric, cognitive, and psychosocial development.

**Findings:** Parents’ responses reveal that they have shown a keen interest on implementing activities posted on the platform, either by cooperating with educators or pursuing the activities independently. 74% of parents found the platform easy to use, while 67% reported that the time they spent engaging with their children in activities increased significantly.

Parents reported more frequent and closer engagement with their children, which resulted in progress in specific developmental domains of their children. Improvements were reported in engagement in physical activity and attention span, while children also demonstrated increased socialization and communication skills.
Communication skills were also reported as a concern of many parents, which was expressed in the form of requests for additional activities that promote language and communication skills to address withdrawal of children due to extensive usage of technological tools.

Parents also reported a high level of satisfaction regarding educators’ guidance and interaction to ensure children and parents implement activities easily.

**Figure 4.** Percentage of parents reporting enhanced child developmental domains through the ECD platform

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CHANNELING KNOWLEDGE BUILDING AND INFORMATION EXCHANGE AMONG EDUCATORS

The ECD platform has also been serving as a capacity building tool for educators in preschool and preprimary institutions. Utilizing the ECD content created by experts in the platform, 900 educators across Kosovo have actively instructed parents and have reviewed activities performed by children using the platform. More than 1,600 educators and teachers in preschool and preprimary institutions received virtual trainings from ECD field experts, focusing on learning through play and digital competencies to use the platform.

In this regard, the platform provided an opportunity to establish a digital reporting framework that has standardized the reporting process for all preschool and preprimary institutions in Kosovo.
UNICEF supported the establishment of the Association of Private Preschool Institutions (APPI), which will contribute to greater quality standardization and alternative financing. The ECD platform will provide a designated space that recognizes the private sector and encourages greater connection and standardization of tools and learning methods among public and private institutions in Kosovo.

**FOUNDATION OF THE ASSOCIATION OF PRIVATE PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS**

The ECD platform has demonstrated to significantly impact the development of children, engagement of parents, and professional development of educators, thus, addressing needs that persist beyond the pandemic situation in Kosovo. It is therefore imperative that the ECD platform is further advanced with the goal of providing access to the most vulnerable children and bringing ECD at the fore of the development agenda in Kosovo. The success achieved with the ECD platform will be perpetuated by:

1. **Complementing the ECD platform with the content of the ECD package for vulnerable children:**
   complement the activities posted on the ECD platform for each age group and provide additional support to disadvantaged families and children in carrying out development-oriented activities while engaging with each other. UNICEF Kosovo is in the process of compiling ECD packages with didactic materials that will aid children 0-6 years old conduct play based activities and perform learning by doing at home. These didactic materials are selected based on the set of activities in the ECD platform.

2. **Broadcasting audio recordings of ECD activities in the national TV channels:**
   stream ECD platform activities every day in the national television, in four languages and at regular hours. Despite the high internet penetration rate in Kosovo, the most marginalized families have restricted access to digital tools and thus, can not attend to platform activities or communications with the educators. Therefore, national television channels will be utilized to reach children most in need.
3. **Enhancing the ECD platform with interactive games and adopting the parenting app for children 0-6:**
   use parents’ feedback to strengthen the interactive features of the platform and integrate smart digital games for children. Additionally, mobilize the national experts’ team to adopt the parenting application, introduced by the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, to reach parents with on-line and off-line functionalities and supporting all domains of the nurturing care. This application will provide interactive features such as the individual assessment of developmental milestones, health check-ups, etc.

4. **Strengthening leadership for early childhood development programmes and coordinating efforts more effectively across sectors:**
   strengthen the multi-sectorial advisory mechanism on ECD to coordinate the policy framework and involvement of three main ECD sectors, comprising health, education, and social protection. UNICEF is supporting the implementation of the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) study and the ECD situational analysis, led by the World Bank and involving key sectors providing ECD services in Kosovo. The results and recommendations derived will be used to strengthen cross-sectorial collaboration, as well as policy making and financing decisions for ECD.

5. **Strengthening the network of private preschool providers:**
   improve and standardize the quality of services provided by private preschools in line with national standards and increase collaboration with educational and policy-making institutions with the aim of improving quality and inclusion in early childhood education in Kosovo.