Regional Office Annual Report 2020

Europe and Central Asia

Update on the context and trends

The dominant theme in 2020 was COVID-19. By late 2020, 27.5 million people in Europe and Central Asia (ECA) had been diagnosed with COVID-19, and nearly 587,000 had died.[1] COVID-19 surfaced certain vulnerabilities. Almost 1 million children do not receive all scheduled vaccinations in the region[2], including more than 500,000 children, who miss out on routine measles vaccination. Many countries continue facing outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases that threaten children's lives and well-being. Estimates suggest an additional 6.4 million people in the region – half of them children – could fall into poverty as a result of COVID-19.[3]

In the UNICEF’s programme countries[4], more than 4.6 million children one-year younger than official primary school entry to upper secondary school age were out of school before the pandemic.[5] An additional 19.5 million children in school did not reach minimum proficiency.[6] The pandemic caused unprecedented disruption to learning. Currently, 63 million learners live in countries where schools are either partially or fully closed across the region. In UNICEF’s programme counties, 26.6 million learners (primary to upper-secondary aged) are still affected by partial closure of schools, posing challenges related to learning quality, equity, and assessment. School closures are predicted to produce learning losses equal to 0.3 to 0.9 equivalent years of schooling, with the most significant impact on already-marginalized children.[7]

The isolation of children with disabilities, children in institutional care, refugee and migrant children, and children from minority communities is also likely to intensify. Children with disabilities across the region are not identified early and, due to high levels of stigma and discrimination, continue to face multiple rights violations and exclusion from education and community participation. At least 75 per cent of children with disabilities are excluded from quality, inclusive education, with hundreds of thousands remaining in segregated 'special' schools or residential care. Collecting data on children with disabilities in line with the social model of disability is becoming more common in the region. The proportion of 5-to-17-year-olds with functional difficulties in at least one domain, for countries with a recent MICS, is around 20 per cent with a big variation.[8]

Despite a noticeable decline in the total number of children in residential care in many countries over the past decade (from 366,549 children in 2009 to 245,768 children in 2018[9]), the region continues to have one of the highest numbers of children in the world who are deprived of their right to grow up in a supportive and caring family environment[10]. Infant homes also continue to be a feature of some countries in the region with almost 6,400 infants and young children in infant homes at the end of 2018.[11]

Since 2015, Europe has seen an influx of refugees and migrants fleeing conflict, violence, insecurity, and a lack of opportunities.[12] Turkey is hosting almost 3 million Syrian refugees. Nearly half are children; most are outside refugee camps and have limited access to education and other essential services.[13] In 2020, 99,463 refugees and migrants arrived in Europe through the Mediterranean migration routes.[14] Thousands of children of foreign fighters from the region are trapped in camps, detention centres, or orphanages in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere: they are among the world’s most vulnerable children. While some countries, such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey, have returned children, many Western countries have stalled over returning their citizens.[15]

One million children in Eastern Ukraine continue requiring humanitarian assistance, with schools, health clinics, and water facilities having been damaged or destroyed.[16] There is an ever-present risk of renewed fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Data available on
children living in conflict zones is limited as they go uncounted in national averages.

Gender-biased sex selection during pregnancy in the Caucasus and some Balkan countries is creating the phenomenon of ‘missing girls’. Meanwhile, while boys are more likely to be out of upper-secondary school in some countries, the enrolment gaps are largest where more girls are out-of-school. An average of 64 per cent of child-related SDG indicators in the region either have insufficient data or show insufficient progress towards the global target.

In this context, it is increasingly important to ensure that UNICEF’s comparative advantages and contributions are well recognized in the region. Europe and Central Asia Regional Office has developed a focused set of four Regional Flagship Results making a clear, concise and compelling argument on what UNICEF can do to support children in the region.

[4] UNICEF’s programme countries in ECA covers 22 countries: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (SCR1244), Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.
[5] UNICEF calculation based on the most recent data available from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (extracted 22 March, 2021) and the 6th round of MICS.
[16] https://www.unicef.org/eca/emergencies

Major contributions and drivers of results

Goal Area 1: Thriving: Health, Immunization, Nutrition and Early Childhood Development (ECD)
In 2020, ECARO's Health and Nutrition Programme focused on supporting countries to effectively respond to COVID-19 and continue essential services for women, children, and vulnerable communities. Support to countries on MNCH ensured continuity of maternal, new born and health care, immunization, and nutrition services during the pandemic. Priority countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus were supported to strengthen health policy and system capacities to sustainably raise the quality of maternal and newborn health care services, focusing on disparity reduction. Over 1.4 million caregivers were reached through innovative digital and social media channels with messaging on the importance of breastfeeding.

UNICEF supported health systems strengthening in immunization supply financing and HIV forecasting, quantification, procurement, and supply budgeting. Additionally, in response to COVID-19, all UNICEF's programme countries in ECA were supported to strengthen infection prevention and control, including CO procurement of $39.7 million worth of life-saving supplies for health services to treat 4.6 million acute cases. These supplies in under-resourced health centres saved lives, and in schools, ensured safe re-opening. Deliveries to communities focused on the poorest and most marginalized, especially children in refugee and migrant accommodations across Greece, Italy, Western Balkans, and children in closed institutions or vulnerable families.

Vaccination was among the first services affected by COVID-19. As part of the regional immunization flagship result, UNICEF focused on supporting countries to maintain and restore vaccination. The partnership with WHO EURO was instrumental in advocating for prioritization and maintaining routine immunization. A joint letter from UNICEF and WHO Regional Directors in April supported advocacy efforts. Close monitoring of vaccine stocks in countries and alternative solutions to delivery resulted in no stock out. Support to countries in maintaining immunization services and planning for catch-up vaccinations resulted in restoring services by June, including in five countries with suspended vaccination. Continued efforts were made to address vaccine hesitancy through mainstreaming demand for immunization into national programmes and social media tracking of immunization-related sentiments and attitudes to influence vaccine acceptance and uptake. However, the pandemic has affected immunisation coverage, and countries report decreases in coverage with basic antigens ranging from 5-30 per cent.

Support to parenting became even more vital, given the discontinuity of services and direct support provided to children due to COVID-19. With ECARO guidance, 977,588 parents of children under 5 received counselling and other types of parenting support. The first version of the Parentbuddy parenting application providing guidance and support to parents of children aged 0-6 on all domains of child health and development was developed and launched.

A multi-country home visiting action plan was developed based on evaluation of programmes across the region and thanks to successful fundraising, DG NEAR granted funds supporting implementation of the management response and action plan. Six training modules were developed, including one on immunization. On-line modules are available on AGORA, and already customized and used to train professionals in Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Kosovo and Serbia, with potential for further expansion.

Goal Area 2: Learning

ECARO successfully responded to challenges posed by COVID-19 to ensure continuity of early childhood education (ECE) services. ECE system reforms in the region continued, with four countries supporting national action plans for the sub-sector. At least two countries leveraged significant resources from other donors – i.e. GPE, EU. Eight countries were supported to develop national digital ECE platforms by introducing Learning Passports and support for customized national ECE platforms, which host resources such as games and activities, lesson plans, and tips for early learners, as well as continuous professional development resources for ECE educators, including guidance on supporting home-based learning and COVID-19 mitigation.
ECARO promoted and prioritized parenting support initiatives, including distance parenting programmes and innovative solutions to reach young children's caregivers. The #LearningAtHome communication parenting campaign ran across 22 countries in response to COVID-19, providing parents with concrete examples of fun, creative and learning activities to do with their children during lockdown. In Kazakhstan, the campaign reached 2 million people via Facebook, Instagram and the CO website; in Moldova a distance parenting programme for families with children aged 0-7 reached 100,000 caregivers.

UNICEF developed guidance for re-opening preschools and kindergartens after COVID-19; this was disseminated across the region to ensure preschools re-opened safely. The guidance was also published as global good practice.

ECARO successfully piloted an approach to support young children with complex communication difficulties with affordable assistive technology solutions and enable their early education and social inclusion. More than 1,500 children in 3 countries were supported and several products developed to support scale up to other countries, including a training platform for professionals on how to use assistive technologies for early identification and intervention for children with developmental difficulties, and a roadmap for scaling up.

UNICEF provided technical advice for school optimization initiatives in North Macedonia and Romania, to facilitate efficient education financing. In partnership with OECD, reviews of evaluation/assessment systems were completed in Albania and Serbia and are underway in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A PISA-2018 analysis report, which assessed educational situations and outcomes in the Western Balkans, was launched at a ministerial meeting. Teacher education for quality inclusive education was supported through the LearnIn initiative in 11 countries. An emergency manual for inclusion was developed with three webinars targeting teacher educators, and these were used for country-level training in Albania, Greece, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. UNICEF's partnership with Akelius for the inclusion of refugee and vulnerable children was expanded from Greece to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine.

ECARO successfully responded to emerging educational challenges and learning needs under the COVID-19 pandemic. UNICEF provided: guidance on school re-opening; guidance on monitoring access and learning participation during/beyond COVID-19; a repository on school re-opening and a broader COVID-19 Education Resource Platform; and webinars on formative assessment and mitigation of learning loss.

**Goal Areas 3: Protecting: Protection and Migration**

As part of the EU's Child Guarantee, UNICEF tested approaches to tackling child poverty and social exclusion in Europe, including processes for EU-wide analysis, country-level specific analysis, national planning for tackling child poverty and social exclusion and modelling services and interventions to reach the most disadvantaged children and their families. The Child Guarantee will be a multi-billion-euro Commission investment over the next seven years and UNICEF's work during this pilot stage can potentially make a strong and lasting contribution to addressing children's rights in Europe.

UNICEF continued to advocate for the more than 600,000 children in institutional care to be included in both internal and external EU engagement at the regional level. The EU's next Multi-Annual Financial Framework now contains the imperative to assist member states with the important transition from institutional to family and community-based care, setting the stage for substantial financial and technical assistance to Member States on social work and social service reforms. ECARO published two important pieces of work around de-institutionalization in 2020 – the first helping to further define where and under what conditions certain forms of small, integrated residential care are appropriate within the continuum of family and community-based care options; and the second providing detailed
guidance to COs on supporting disability-sensitive deinstitutionalization-related reforms.

UNICEF worked with partners to address missing information on the numbers of children in institutional care and foster care in Europe. The initiative has identified bottlenecks in data collection systems and processes across the EU and there is potential for agreeing several EU-wide comparable indicators to measure progress on use of alternative care. Cooperation with UNECE and the Conference of European Statisticians is helping to ensure sustainable engagement for the TransMonEE network, which continues to facilitate exchanges and make progress around increased administrative data for child protection across the entire region, including alternative care, justice, and violence-related data points.

UNICEF supported a justice-for-children conference in February in Sarajevo, with ministries of justice attending from across the region. The conference considered progress in justice reforms across the region and identified key priorities, including accelerating reforms for victims and witnesses of crime, advancing work around civil proceedings (custody and family law), and addressing the needs of children affected by migration and disability who are in contact with the law. UNICEF also engaged more with the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC), where a partnership to support countries in 2021 is being developed in coordination with the Committee on the Rights of the Child and EU child rights focal points.

In partnership with UNHCR and IOM, UNICEF continued increasing country-level capacities, policies, and frameworks around migration, including strategic engagement around the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum; guidance, and tracking and advocacy around relocation of unaccompanied children from Greece to other EU member states and critical needs of unaccompanied children in the Western Balkans. In addition, UNICEF supported Central Asian countries to strengthen child protection and social protection responses to children affected by migration.

Goal Areas 5: Equity: Social Protection, Child Poverty, and Investments in Children

To increase the visibility of social protection in response to COVID-19, UNICEF embarked on a partnership with the World Bank on tracking government social protection responses and contributed to the development of 14 “living papers” with substantial attention and readership globally. This has led to a 2-year programme of work with the World Bank and OECD on financing social protection responses to COVID-19.

UNICEF ECARO provided technical and financial support to COs to strengthen responses on social protection and socioeconomic analysis. Over half the countries in the region were supported to develop socioeconomic surveys, microsimulations, and related products, which were used as advocacy and technical advisory products to increase the visibility of COVID-19’s impacts on children. ECARO also provided technical assistance to COs for the expansion of national social assistance programmes and produced a guidance note, together with the IBC for Social Protection, on COVID-19 and social protection in ECA. Regional Directors from UNDP and UNICEF outlined areas for collaboration for both teams in the socio-economic response to COVID-19.

Gender dimension

ECARO led and supported Gender Programmatic Reviews and country gender profiles for multiple countries in the region. The Europe Refugee Migrant Response in 2020 included addressing gender-based violence capacities, system strengthening, advocacy, and guidance on unaccompanied and separated girls in Greece, Italy, Serbia, and Bulgaria, with 1.4 million USD raised in FY 2020 for project continuation during COVID-19. Gender-based violence response capacity was also enhanced in an emergency earthquake context through training for all Central Asia countries in partnership with IFRC.

ECARO continued to collaborate with the Regional Issue-Based Coalition on Gender Equality and as
part of Common Chapter collaborations with UN Agencies, UNICEF and UNDP in Europe and Central Asia and Asia Pacific Regions organized a joint Gender and COVID policy discussion on Gender-based Violence and use of Technology. Additionally, UNICEF and UNDP further collaborated in 2020 to develop a regional policy advocacy paper on the gender dimensions of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, with comprehensive policy recommendations for a gender-responsive COVID-19 recovery.

**Humanitarian situations**

Emergency response was a significant focus, including to the COVID-19 crisis affecting all UNICEF's programme countries, the refugee/migrant crisis in Europe, the Croatia earthquake and escalation of military hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Emergency preparedness, within UNICEF's Procedure on Preparedness for Emergency Response (EPP) was strengthened in 21 countries to assure better that UNICEF COs are ready to fulfil UNICEF’s humanitarian mandate when an emergency occurs. Strategic partnerships were maintained/established, including: with IFRC for continued earthquake preparedness in Central Asia, enabling UNICEF to preposition emergency supplies, support partnerships and capacity building for preparedness with Red Crescent Societies, undertake response to small scale emergencies (flooding, displacement); CADRI (cofacilitated with UNDP) to prepare a scoping mission for Kyrgyzstan through remote modality, including working with CADRI secretariat to develop the tool and schedule, and Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) to create an Air Pollution programme for Western Balkans.

**Influencing global and regional discourse and policy**

*Partnerships*

Partnerships section's work and the results achieved were instrumental for UNICEF’s ECA region for building political space on the internal EU agenda, the Child Guarantee & Child Poverty, as well as Social Exclusion agendas in Europe, and US$ 190 million was raised from the EU, representing 24.6% of the total funds raised by UNICEF from EU in 2020. In comparison with 2019, ECAR has been able to increase the private sector contributions by 27 per cent and from IFIs by 9.2 per cent. Continued partnerships with the Russian Federation resulted in provision of US$ 18.1 million to support UNICEF programmes globally. More than 200 staff members in the region have received training on EU engagement and grant management, engagement with European international financial institutions and regional development banks, donor reporting, and compliance.

The COVID-19 crisis provided an opportune moment for dialogue, advocacy, fundraising and further leveraging with businesses. UNICEF Business Advisory Councils established in various countries in the region have proven to be instrumental positioning UNICEF as an expert on children, child rights, and business, and a reliable supporter of responsible business conduct, particularly important in the context of COVID-19.

*Communication*

UNICEF ECARO actively reinforced UNICEF's regional positioning as a leading child rights organization by enhancing ECARO's digital and social media reach, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic response. RO digital channels (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, UNICEF official website) reached more than 19 million people, including Russian-speaking audiences in ECAR. Access to these channels peaked during the first and second waves of the pandemic. UNICEF set up dashboards and provided the teams with reports, generating evidence on vaccine hesitancy and other issues that may impact UNICEF’s or that of partners. Pilot countries included Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Serbia. UNICEF ECARO developed a new Social Media Strategy 2021-2022 for the region and has included a programme impact as a key element including how to engage with target populations through Digital Actionable Insights for programming purposes.

Knowledge management, data and research and evaluation
As a result of UNICEF advocacy, a UNECE/Conference of European Statisticians Task Force on Statistics on Children and Youth was created in 2020, with the Task Force work plan approved, membership expanded to cover additional countries. Work towards optimization of data collection within the framework of TransMonEE continued with the aspiration of transforming it into a one-stop data centre on children in the whole ECA region. Support was provided to Uzbekistan to prepare for the MICS fieldwork and Belarus to finalization of its MICS report.

Seven RO-managed Country Programme Evaluations (CPEs) were completed. In addition, and in response to COVID-19, two separate multi-country evaluations/assessments were initiated to provide timely evidence to the humanitarian response: the Real-Time Assessment of the COVID-19 response in Croatia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Ukraine, and the developmental evaluation of ECD interventions responding to COVID-19. ECARO evaluated UNICEF’s Contribution to the Migrant and Refugee Response in Greece, adding important information on the way forward of the RO’s work in high-income countries and the country programme in Greece. Additionally, ECARO Evaluation assisted COs to adapt to the COVID-19 context, shifting to remote primary data collection, ensuring ethical safeguards remained intact, and maximizing use of available secondary data. The total utilized budget for evaluation at the regional office level was USD 395,240. In the case of Country Programme Evaluations, funds matched additional funds from Country Office.

**United Nations Reform**

The RO supported the technical review of the CCAs and UNSDCFs in the following countries: CCA reviews in Kosovo*, Albania, North Macedonia, Armenia, Moldova and Montenegro. UNSDCF reviews in: Turkey, Georgia, North Macedonia, Armenia, Kosovo* and Serbia. In addition, UNICEF provided continuous support on the IBCs in particular through analytical and advisory support, including cross border analysis (in particular for the CCA) r Furthermore, technical assistance and communication through IBCs ensured access to relevant guidance and captured good practices as well as challenges within respective areas to inform lessons learned. Finally, PSG, as coordinated by the Regional DCO regularly met online to discuss the development of the CCAs and UNSDCFs.

**Cross-cutting strategies**

**Strategic Planning**

UNICEF ECARO comprehensively supported CPD development in 2020. Due to the pandemic, technical assistance was provided online. COs received bespoke support targeting specific issues related to the local context. A CPD roadmap webinar series was conducted in June and July to foster exchange between countries and provide Guidance on SitAn development, Integrating Gender, and Mainstreaming Risk informed Programming into CPDs.

**Communication for Development (C4D)**

In 2020, tools and guidance were developed, with WHO Europe, to support the COVID-19 response. As co-lead of the regional coordination group on risk communication and community engagement (RCCE), UNICEF supported the development of guidance on RCCE, a monitoring tool on COVID-19 vaccination and co-facilitated webinars on RCCE for COVID-19. With the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, a regional listening mechanism was developed on immunization and COVID-19, an initiative that covered 15 countries. A chatbot, Health Buddy+, was developed to provide accurate information on COVID-19, including on symptoms, modes of transmission, mask-use, physical distance, mental health, and vaccine development. A monitoring and evaluation framework was drafted with Drexel University to measure changes in the quality of immunization services delivery, and a training package was developed with Columbia University School of Social Work, to strengthen core competencies of the social service workforce and allied professionals on community engagement and was tested in Albania, Georgia and Kazakhstan.

**Internal Management**
The RO continued to provide oversight, technical guidance and quality assurance for work processes, internal controls and cost effectiveness in the areas of Finance, HR, ICTD, Security and Audit. These efforts also included support for the Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfers as well as Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Authority. During 2020, ECARO was audited by the UN Board of Auditors and all management actions are implemented. ECARO Human Resources (HR) introduced a successful approach to engage with the HR community to ensure an appropriate response to the HR challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic particularly staff well-being. The team continued providing strategic support for efficient selection processes, performance management best practices, and organizational design.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

- The key lessons learned for 2020 concerns emergency preparedness and risk programming. COVID-19 revealed, for instance, the weakness of infection prevention and control in health facilities and the need for strengthening health system resilience to be better prepared for future disasters. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in health and education facilities also needs to be improved. The pandemic highlighted the importance of close cooperation between humanitarian and development agencies and governments to provide strong support in fighting the crisis. In addition, the fact that the coronavirus response has required UNICEF to work closely with a wide range of partners further underlines the vital need for strong coordination to leverage combined strengths and synergies for a focused response. The COVID-19 outbreak also accelerated a shift to online modalities, to reach a greater number of children and youth, as well as frontline responders.

- The increased involvement of business in support of the COVID-19 response highlighted the need for capacity development within UNICEF to work with this sector. Networked ways of working will be required, in which agencies such as UNICEF established innovative partnerships with development institutions, private companies, local communities, and new philanthropists, to benefit from their skills, scale, access, supply chains and sustainable business models. It also helped UNICEF develop competencies, and establish innovative systems learning from best practice examples. In the flash appeal for the COVID-19 response, private companies participated to supply PPE and critical medical equipment. Businesses' flexible processes enabled the rapid mobilization of resources, enhanced interagency/intersectoral coordination, and facilitated the free transport.

- Partnerships with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) helped to accelerate ECARO’s engagement in data-driven education planning and management. However, intellectual property rights have limited UNICEF’s visibility in and contribution to the joint work and products. Accordingly, the partnership agreement was amended to ensure property rights are shared equally by UNICEF and OECD.

- Ongoing regional ECE initiatives demonstrate that the development of rigorous, flexible and multi-country products requires significant investment, relevant staff skills and adequate time for country-level inputs and testing to ensure the innovations and regional products are relevant and sufficiently flexible to fit varied country contexts. These efforts have resulted in economies of scale and improved tailored support to countries, strengthening initiative take-up and sustainability. UNICEF has sought to build on promising COVID response innovations and embed these into ongoing ECE system strengthening and reform efforts, such as Learning Passport platforms, and training hubs for ECE practitioners, etc.
• UNICEF is increasingly working with the European Union to influence the EU’s external and internal agenda for children. Many EU Child Guarantee Phase III approaches could be promoted outside the EU, especially in accession countries.

• To promote the childcare reform agenda, UNICEF has developed and widely disseminated the White Paper on the use of small residential care, which also helps dialogue on the use of residential care for children. Children in boarding school are the next grey area that UNICEF will address through a similar paper developed in 2021, using the same development process, reaching consensus with an external expert reference group.

• UNICEF has built the capacity to engage around the rights of children returning from conflict zones, mainly Iraq and Syria. This has benefited from coordination across regions, countries, and with HQ colleagues. A coherent response has been built through collaboration with governments and the network of child rights ombudspersons in the Russian Federation and Central Asia.

• Obstacles to distance learning and skills-building during COVID-19 included lack of access to devices and inequities in learning contexts. Efforts have been made to bridge the gap. Despite the negative impacts of COVID-19 on youth employment opportunities and participation, youth were activated and engaged in responding to the pandemic and in resilience and recovery plans. The digital engagement generated new opportunities for youth leadership and initiatives in countering climate degradation, gender stereotypes, racial prejudice, hate speech, and social exclusion.

• The Future We Want (FWW) campaign was launched in Italy in 2020 to give voice to young migrants, refugees, and adolescents on their experience of lockdown and vision of a post-COVID-19 future. Over 2,000 adolescents participated in an online survey and elaborated a 10-point Manifesto in June, and the campaign was continuously adapted to ongoing developments. The final phase of the campaign was a call to action for young people through adaptation and delivery by school teachers and/or trainers of the FWW content into online classes, reaching more than 1,200 students all over the country.

• Gender capacity building has improved across the region with resources and practical sessions. There is a greater focus on gender-transformative programming, strengthening gender leadership and accountability, addressing harmful gender norms, strengthening gender data analysis, ensuring investment, gender resource allocation and gender-focused results approach in multiple. At Regional and country levels priorities are multi-sectorally for gender integration. Limited cross sectoral work impacts gender results and integrated programing. To address this requires smarter investment, greater resource allocations and gender capacities in new proposals, programming, PBRs and CPD planning stages. A growing external risk in the region is gender equality backlash, re-traditionalization, persistent gender norms, less space for working beyond the gender binary and a diminishing space for women empowerment networks and civil society space. Without joined-up inter-agency action these externalities may limit the pathways for gender transformative programming in the region.