Update on the context and situation of children

Croatia is a high-income EU country with US$14,101 GDP per capita in 2020[1]. Data shows that the pandemic has greatly affected the Croatian economy since mid-March 2020. However, in 2021, the decline in real GDP started to reverse. Estimates show that the GDP in the third quarter of 2021 is 15.8 per cent higher in real terms than in the same quarter of 2020, and 4.2 per cent higher than in the same quarter in 2019.[2]

Despite a decrease of children at-risk-of-poverty from 21.4 per cent in 2017 to 16.8 in 2020 (higher for boys), the negative effects of the pandemic and earthquakes from 2020 are expected. The persistent at-risk-of-poverty rate for children increased to 12.9 per cent in 2020 and remains a source of concern. The government’s commitment to addressing child poverty is confirmed through the development of the Child Guarantee National Action Plan and the implementation of Phase III of the Child Guarantee programme, financed by the European Commission, and implemented with UNICEF’s support.

The social welfare system advanced primary legislation and investment in capacity building and increase of the workforce. Still, the access to benefits and protection measures targeting the most vulnerable children need improvement.

In December 2020, a series of strong earthquakes caused human and material losses in Sisak-Moslavina county. Seven persons, including one child, lost their lives. In 2021, the Government declared a state of disaster for affected counties. Within a year, more than 5,000 earthquakes were recorded causing fear to the residents and further damaging the buildings. A total of 13,750 children were directly affected, 41,676 objects were damaged, including the region’s largest hospital, schools, and health centres. Sixteen temporary container settlements were set up in the affected towns, while many people continued to live in mobile homes or containers near their damaged homes. The Parliament passed the Law on Reconstruction which should enable large-scale reconstructions throughout 2022 and beyond.

Croatia has progressed in providing a legal and regulatory framework for protecting and advancing children’s and adolescents’ rights. However, these efforts need to be met with good reinforcement measures, including improving capacities, across sectors. In 2021, the Government appointed new members of the Council for Children, a cross-sectoral body tasked to monitor the implementation of the UNCRC and coordinate the implementation of national strategic documents for children.

The UNICEF study on subjective well-being of children (2020) showed that children themselves positively assess their life and, on average, are more frequently in a pleasant mood[3]. As many as 95 per cent of the youngest students are satisfied with their lives, with 80.3 per cent of them being very satisfied. Similar findings can be found in a study published by the Institute for Public Health[4]. Croatia also shows one of the lowest incidences of bullying in school, ranking 66th out of 75 countries[5]. However, with the pandemic and restricted opportunities for social contact, the prolonged pandemic is taking a toll on the mental health of all, but particularly of young people who are at a stage in their life where they need social contact outside of their immediate family to develop their identities[6].

Critical challenges for gender equality remain in the labour market, women’s roles in politics and business, care-work distribution, the situation of Roma girls and women, and multiple discrimination of women with disabilities. With 59.2 out of 100 points, Croatia ranks 19th in the EU on the Gender Equality Index. Subjective wellbeing research revealed that girls are more involved in household work. Victims of gender-based violence and harassment are mostly girls/women. Secondary school attendance is higher for Roma boys (36 per cent) than girls (26 per cent), reducing girls’ chances of entering the labour market[7]. According to Roma girls and women, the key reason for their dropping out of secondary education is related to marriage and motherhood. Data on pre-primary education with 81.8 per cent of children enrolled compared to 95.5 of the EU average indicates the need for
acceleration of the Government’s efforts to expand access to preschool. Differences among counties are still present and represent an equity issue. **NEET rate for adolescents** 15-19 was 9.1 per cent in 2020, higher than a year before, also higher for girls. The latest PISA scores (2018) were below the OECD average for numeracy and reading so the positive effects of the curricular reform are yet to be manifested.

In general, **access to healthcare** is adequate, including care for prematurely born babies and pregnant women, with concerns regarding unequal access to specialised services for children in rural and remote areas, such as during the pandemic. As stated by caregivers, up to 14.5 per cent of children in need, depending on the epidemiological circumstances, could not receive health support timely. Residential institutions for children have been subjected to **transformation processes** for more than 10 years. The latest available data point at a 2.5 per cent decrease in the number of **children placed in residential care** compared to 2019. However, the percentage of children in family-based care of the total number of children in all forms of formal alternative care is 63.5 and should be increased.

https://www.hzjz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/HBSC_2018_HR.pdf
https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/cd52fb72-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/cd52fb72-en

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**Major contributions and drivers of results**

Croatia has an advanced legal framework, positive practices and well-established expertise in several child rights areas — with a growing number of citizens motivated to contribute to the child rights agenda — a vibrant civil society, strong academic institutions and an expanding corporate sector. Thus, Croatia has a **high potential to address the remaining challenges and equity gaps** and to increase its contribution to the protection and realization of child rights abroad.

Children’s unrealized rights coincide with multidimensional poverty, ethnicity and disability. UNICEF programmes have been focused on fostering diversity and inclusion for the most vulnerable children. With numerous national governmental, corporate, and civil society partners including media, UNICEF is working on securing early childhood interventions (ECI) to the most vulnerable children, bringing vulnerable children into early and preschool education, generating positive educational experiences for children at risk of dropout and creating accessible and integrated services for vulnerable children and their families. Some of the key results to which UNICEF contributed since 2017 include the 10.4 percentage points increase of children in early childhood education (ECE) which is now 81.8 compared to 71.4 in 2016. The number of children living in residential care decreased by 2.5
percentage points (difference 2019 vs 2020), the number of children receiving ECI within the social welfare sector increased by 93 per cent, from 547 children in 2014 to 1,056 in 2020. The number of childcare professionals with increased knowledge and skills for working with families at risk increased by 3,500. The number of individuals supporting the realization of Country Programme of cooperation with Croatia goals increased by 15 per cent (2017 vs. 2021).

The Government of the Republic of Croatia and UNICEF are actively engaged in the testing of the Child Guarantee programme aimed at ending child poverty and social exclusion. UNICEF is modelling several Child Guarantee interventions to support the argument for future resources targeting the most marginalized children, families, and communities. Thus, UNICEF supports the establishment and provision of early childhood development programmes, family support, and child protection services and interventions adapted to the intercultural environment plus programmes in which young people express their ideas and develop their potential. UNICEF also prepared a Deep Dive Analysis providing the evidence for the development of the National Action Plan for the European Child Guarantee 2030 and the National Plan for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2021 – 2027.

Within the testing of the Child Guarantee in Medjimurje County, a model of parenting support for families living in an adverse environment was adapted for Roma families. Consequently, more than 317 children and 387 parents benefitted from parenting and psychosocial support. Also, more than 700 children and parents benefited from preventive and counselling services and interventions. Capacity building and support are provided to the social welfare system to improve early identification, referrals and case management. Cross-sectoral cooperation with families at risk was adapted to the intercultural environment (including Roma population) benefitting more than 2,300 children. Moreover, UNICEF is working with partners on establishing community resource centres for children and families in 4 selected municipalities. UNICEF finalized technical documentation required for construction of resource centres; construction permits were issued in 4 municipalities, while in 2 municipalities alternative locations were identified. Construction will begin in early 2022.

A model for early childhood education (ECE) is also being tested as part of the Child Guarantee. Over 200 children benefitted from regularly organized non-formal play and learning activities in newly equipped Play Hubs. 77 kindergarten teachers and other professionals have strengthened capacities about social justice and innovative education practices. A cabinet at the Faculty of Teacher Education has been equipped with a space where students can train innovative teaching methods. A formula to standardise the monthly kindergarten cost was developed.

Within testing a model of integrated and coordinated early childhood intervention (ECI) services, 137 children aged 0-7 with or at risk of developmental delays or disabilities as well as 264 caregivers benefited from provided services. The ECD outreach team also provided 1188 services to 515 children and 235 adults. An integrated Action Plan for ECI in Medjimurje County was developed based on the mapping and analysis of the ECI services for young children. Two online courses were designed to increase professional capacities in early identification of developmental delays, support to children with delays/disabilities and a contemporary approach to ECI.

106 professors from five universities have strengthened capacities and knowledge for transmitting inclusive pedagogic practices in a university setting. Three publications on educational inclusion will guide their work and over 190 participants took an active part in a national discussion on inclusive pedagogy, including gender-responsive content. Cabinets at the five universities for inclusive and innovative teaching and learning have been equipped thanks to a donation from Kaufland Hrvatska.

A unique hybrid assessment of the baby-friendly hospital initiative, developed by UNICEF during the COVID-19 pandemic, was successfully implemented in one maternity ward (among the first in the world). This method was presented at national and international meetings.

Long-term investment in the justice system and cooperation with the Judicial Academy, starting from a comprehensive institutional needs assessment, resulted in establishing a framework for lifelong
learning of judicial officials and non-legal professionals working with children involved in all legal proceedings that includes equity perspective and addresses gender issues. Trainings fully funded by the Judicial Academy began and will reach all justice professionals in contact with children. In 2021, UNICEF completed the programme “For a Stronger Family" in close partnership with the line ministry. It contributed to the education and capacity building of 762 professionals, including 338 outreach workers thus ensuring training materials for some 1,600 professionals in social welfare centres and 2,351 family outreach workers. A set of social work assessment tools developed under this programme was integrated into the social welfare application, accompanied by guidance and manual available to all social welfare professionals. A parenting support programme for families living in adverse circumstances was developed and is being delivered by all family centres in Croatia, nationwide. Existing gender norms regarding children’s caregiving were addressed through parenting support programmes resulting in behavioural change among fathers. To support the further process of deinstitutionalization and development of foster care, training curricula for foster care parents was standardized, a training manual was developed, and the umbrella CSO of foster parents strengthened. Trainings on cross-sectoral cooperation and integrated provision of child protection services benefited 939 experts from the education, police, judiciary, social welfare, and health systems, including the guidelines for improving inter-sectoral cooperation. This programme was independently evaluated in 2020, and in 2021 UNICEF and the line ministry focused on implementing its recommendations that enhanced cooperation with the Government in ensuring the sustainability of achieved results and further investments through the Recovery and Resilience Fund.

In cooperation with the Government, UNICEF initiated the improvement of the assessment and interventions for girls and boys with behavioural problems in social welfare and justice institutions, thus addressing some gender gaps in the child-related justice and social welfare system. Consequently, a multisectoral and multidisciplinary Advisory Committee on the Care and Treatment of Children and Youth with Behavioural Problems was established, capacities of experts on assessment of children were strengthened and development of a new assessment instrument is underway. For the first time, a comprehensive SWOT analysis of service provision to 953 children with behavioural disorders by more than 570 professionals informed future improvements in relevant systems. Following analysis and recommendations for enhancing protection of GBV survivors, Government increased funds allocations and improved accessibility of services for GBV survivors thus contributing to the realization of EU Gender Equality Strategy.

Working with partners, UNICEF modelled scalable social innovation initiatives for young people equipping them with the knowledge and skills for addressing community challenges and accessing the labour market. Skills-building programmes for adolescent girls and boys (UPSHIFT, Innovation Academy) included 390 participants in 2021, out of which 70 per cent girls. UNICEF engaged adolescent girls and boys through platforms such as Junior Ambassadors for the Rights of Children and Young People, Children’s Participation Advisory Board, Digital Hub on Mental Health, ZABUM voice, Voices of Youth, Children’s Rights Festival, Media Literacy Days, and Schools for Africa. By partnering with youth associations and organizations through innovative, real-time digital participation platforms, UNICEF contributed to increasing adolescents’ access to information and knowledge of their rights. Young people were engaged through UNICEF’s online platforms in communication for prevention of the spread of coronavirus among their peers and for preserving mental health during the pandemic and after earthquakes.

In 2021, UNICEF responded to COVID-19 and earthquakes that hit one of the poorest regions in Croatia. The CO delivered 13.5 tons of emergency supplies and approximately 29,000 packages of hygiene products to the earthquake-affected areas. UNICEF strengthened the capacities of the social welfare system to enable the effective continuation of service delivery and protection of children, women and caregivers. Mobile teams deployed by UNICEF provided mental health and direct psychosocial support to 332 children and 180 caregivers/parents from the most vulnerable families. In the recovery phase, UNICEF supported 29 schools to contribute to the mental health of the community
after a double crisis, i.e. strengthened capacities of school professionals for coping with trauma and grief, improved teaching skills in children's social-emotional competence, and ensured access to the school programme for developing psycho-social resilience and social-emotional competences. Interventions reached 8,402 pupils in Sisak-Moslavina County. A publication for teachers with 20 workshop examples was published for Sisak-Moslavina schools with the support of the line ministry. Moreover, 152 Roma girls and 117 Roma boys at risk of dropout have been supported to remain in school.

As part of the earthquake response, UNICEF provided support to the provision of sensory and occupational therapy and physiotherapy for children with disabilities. As a result, 2,344 occupational, 1,260 sensory integration, and 760 physical therapy sessions were provided to 74 children with disabilities up to 8 years of age and 4,067 individual counselling sessions for 125 caregivers of children with disabilities. Sisak school was equipped with a cabinet for sensory didactics that will be used by pupils with severe multiple disabilities. Through contribution to multi-sectoral assessment and coordination of emergency response, and development of the national guidelines for Infant and Young Children Feeding, UNICEF expanded child-sensitive and gender-sensitive approach in emergency preparedness and response.

Key insights and findings from the Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents in Croatia (2021) and numerous evaluations, research and studies from the last couple of years that involved meaningful participation of children and adolescents have been used to draft the new Country Programme between UNICEF and the Government of the Republic of Croatia (2023-2027). The new five-year Country Programme will be finalised in 2022. Its overarching goal is that more children and adolescents in Croatia, particularly the most marginalized and at risk of being left behind, have their rights fulfilled with improved opportunities and support to develop their full potential and live in a safer and inclusive environment.

**Good practices** generated in building partnerships with the private sector, in parental support programmes and the programme for prevention of peer violence were successfully shared with Ukraine, Belarus, Bulgaria, and Uruguay in 2021 via webinars, mentors’ training, and virtual meetings and conferences.

**Communication and advocacy** initiatives led to increased awareness about child rights, resource mobilization from private and public sectors, and winning the support from decision-makers and the wider public, including engagement of adolescents and youth, for the cause of the most vulnerable children. Strategic media relations resulted in 2,446 UNICEF mentions in target media, with 28 million impressions reaching 99,5 per cent of the adult population of Croatia. Social media followers grew by 11 per cent and social media achieved a reach of 15 million, with Instagram growing 41 per cent. People viewing videos on Facebook grew by 100 per cent, adding to record 1,4 million video views across platforms. In support of the Milky Way race, as part of the annual campaign for children with disabilities, marking UNICEF’s 75th anniversary and the Child Guarantee programme, more than 160 high-level stakeholders and supporters, including the President of the Republic of Croatia, the Prime Minister, Government ministers and officials, representatives of the Croatian Parliament and EU Parliament, Mayors, Ombudspersons, UNICEF Ambassadors, Paralympians, prominent athletes, and artists were engaged to advocate for the protection and equal opportunities for the most vulnerable children.

UNICEF’s support to the national programme Towns and Municipalities - Friends of Children continued through advancing the assessment of the status aimed to be more equity-focused and adjusted to children’s needs. The programme is managed by the Union of Societies Our Children and currently engages 148 towns and municipalities, while 79 of them reached national criteria to be awarded as friends of children (children and community members also participate in this process).
Following the successful cooperation with the Faculty of Law on data generation and establishing a university-level course on children’s subjective wellbeing, more than 250 professionals from the education sector were engaged in 2021 on increasing and sharing knowledge regarding the subjective wellbeing of girls and boys.

In line with annual management priorities, a successful resource mobilisation strategy resulted in USD 4.6 million raised in 2021 from the private sector in Croatia. The fundraising efforts allowed UNICEF to fund its programme, while also contributing to global programmes and regular resources. Some 51,000 individual donors contributed to UNICEF programmes through monthly donations and 44,700 individuals supported UNICEF with one-off donations in response to specific appeals. Altogether, more than 94,400 individuals contributed financially and were engaged with UNICEF's mission during 2021 (approximately 2.8 per cent of the total adult population of Croatia[1]).

**Collaboration** with the corporate sector engaged 3,116 companies (including SMEs) in the CO’s activities. The most valuable financial support came from Kaufland Hrvatska, a long-term corporate partner. Corporate entities also assisted with contributions and services-in-kind (i.e., equipment used in programmatic interventions, 15 co-mailing partners to raise additional funds from clients, 14 F2F sites).

The 24 per cent increase in income through House List fundraising appeals (2021 vs. 2020) confirms the high level of **brand recognition and trustworthiness** resulting from a continued focus on inspiring communications, and donor care programmes implemented by UNICEF.

More than 60 companies participated in the 4th generation of the UNICEF-supported **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Academy** – a training on Child Rights and Business Principles – and the 5th cycle began in December. UNICEF applied a sectoral approach in the adoption of CRB through dedicated workshops for the marketing and advertising, ICT, and financial sectors, which gathered more than 90 participants from leading Croatian companies. The focus of an ICC conference which gathered over 300 participants from the business sector was on the importance of respecting and promoting children’s rights in digital marketing. The new edition of the mapping of **responsible business practices towards youth skills building and employment** was launched in cooperation with the Faculty of Economics and Business in Zagreb, with 17 companies, more than 100 students, and Advisory Board members as mentors.

[1] According to the latest available TransMonEE population data (new Census data expected in 2022)
As a trustworthy partner to both the private and public sectors, UNICEF maintained and strengthened the existing partnerships with the Government, EU, Embassies, IFIs and corporates. UNICEF partnership with the European Parliament resulted in joint workshops on mental health for young people and their mentors through EPAS (School’s ambassadors of the European Parliament), while the partnership with the Croatian Parliament resulted in endorsing the Child Guarantee programme and stressing the importance of combating child poverty and social inclusion on different national, regional and international occasions, including the EU Social Summit in Porto. Partnership with the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs resulted in an ODA contribution to UNICEF Egypt for a programme that aims to restore and build capacities of the child and maternal health services for Syrian migrant children and families in Egypt. UNICEF has been exploring the possibilities to steer the EU policies and funding by mobilising and leveraging resources and influencing policies aimed at children. Thus, UNICEF provided its expertise to several working groups and committees for the development of national and action plans with the purpose of steering funding in the child rights’ direction. Mobilising the EU funding for advancing child rights is explored with the respective government bodies under the Croatian National Recovery and Resilience Plan and through the Technical Support Instrument. Based on the partnership with the Croatian Central State Office for Demography and Youth, UNICEF supported the revision of the concept and the methodology of the “Employer Friend of the Family” survey to gain a more comprehensive insight into family-friendly business practices in Croatia and to contribute to the promotion of family-friendly policies in the business community. UNICEF is partnering with the Association of Pension Fund Management Companies and Pension Insurance Companies and media house Vecernji list on the promotion of financial literacy and UNICEF’s youth and adolescents’ programmes. In cooperation with the Croatian Employers’ Association, the holder of the Global Compact initiative in Croatia, UNICEF surveyed business practices that support the reconciliation of business and private life of employees in companies, good practices, and comparisons of results with the attitudes of children and young people about how they are affected by the workplace of their parents/guardians. Special attention in the research is given to practices and examples of protection of employees and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. In close partnership with the Agency for Electronic Media and 12 other institutional partners, including the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Science and Education, UNICEF organised the fourth Media Literacy Days, thus contributing to improving media literacy about mental health and child safety online of more than 15,000 children and adolescents in 155 towns and cities nationwide. Educational materials prepared as part of the cooperation were downloaded 225,000 times, adding to capacity building for media literacy education of educational professionals and parents.
Lessons Learned and Innovations

As a result of the long-term partnership with the Zagreb Stock Exchange and dedicated advocacy efforts on positioning children’s rights and relevant topics in the financial sector, UNICEF provided support to the Croatian Financial Services Supervisory Agency in the integration of children’s rights and family-friendly indicators into the first Guidelines for the Preparation and Disclosure of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Relevant Issues in the country. The Guidelines will help companies in the process of ESG reporting in Croatia and will have long term impact on companies’ reporting and awareness about children’s rights. It is an excellent example of promoting regulatory policies addressing how companies operate and report on practices, which leads to greater awareness on business impact on children’s rights. The partnership with Central State Office for Demography and Youth contributed to the promotion of family-friendly policies in the business community. It showcased how UNICEF can influence and inform policy in a high-income country to design and propose an appropriate course of action to help the business community advance their impact on employees and their children and families. Establishing a sectoral approach in the adoption of Child Rights and Business important issues positioned UNICEF as a relevant and authoritative partner and provider of expertise to the business community.

Independent multi-country evaluation of the UNICEF ECD response to COVID-19 (2021) has found that the hybrid re-assessment of baby-friendly standards carried out by UNICEF can be considered the most innovative out of all of the adaptations supported by UNICEF in Croatia. The hybrid assessment was among the first such assessments in the world. Encouraged by Croatia’s example, other countries in the region already adopted the solution. In addition to being used for future emergencies, some of the solutions introduced by UNICEF in response to COVID-19 can also be used to provide information or services for harder-to-reach populations in general in the future.

In all UNICEF research, analytical and evaluation processes, including the development of the Situation Analysis on Children and Adolescents in Croatia, the CO engaged adolescents and young people that acted not only in the capacity of key informants but also as co-creators of joint programmes of UNICEF and Government of Croatia including the new country programme of cooperation. This practice enables children's and young people's voices to be consistently heard ensuring their meaningful participation. One of the latest examples refers to the formative Evaluation of the Family-Based Care Component where young people raised in foster families and who also participated in focus group discussions during the evaluation, were informed about evaluation findings and had the opportunity to contribute to developing the relevant evaluation management response plan. Suggestions from young people were instrumental in influencing the social sector’s measures for young people leaving public care. They highly appreciated the opportunity to channel their insights in the implementation of evaluation recommendations and have the chance to shape public policies and programmes for children in public care. As children said, they also felt respected and empowered by this experience.