COVID-19 pandemic and energy crisis affected North Macedonia’s economy. 2021 marked a quick economic recovery and GDP is projected to increase by 4.1%, after a 6.1% decline in 2020. [1] The recovery is being put to the test by the energy crisis, which has led to an average increase in the household price of electricity and heating by 15%. The massive 2020 budget deficit of 8.2% of GDP was only moderately reduced to 6.2% in 2021[2]

Political volatility created additional pressure on public machinery. The victory of the opposition on the local elections prompted the resignation of the Government, leading to added political turmoil. Simultaneously, the EU did not reach a consensus to open accession negotiations for North Macedonia.

COVID-19 continued to put constant pressure on the health system. As of January 2021, a cumulative number of 223,330 cases have been registered [3] of which number of positive children is around 2 percent for 0-9 years and 4 percent for 10-19. The country benefited from 300K+ vaccines through COVAX (23% of the total vaccines imported in the country). To date, 41.1% of the total population have been vaccinated with 2 doses.

The most common deprivations of children in North Macedonia were detected through multidimensional poverty study. The deprivations in education, early child development, nutrition, safety, and love and care are among the top five contributors to child poverty. 12% of children aged 5 to 17 and 9% of children under 5 are considered to be multidimensionally poor. At least one in three Roma children experience multidimensional poverty, compared to one in nine in the overall population.

Key health indicators remain concerning especially for the poorest and ethnic minorities. Continuous declining rates are notable in the past decade and shown in the latest official data on immunization - 94.2 percent in 2010 to 90.7 percent in the latest report of 2018 [4] with a notable decline in DTP (83.9%) and MMR1 coverage in 2020 (63 percent). [3] Latest MICS show lower coverage in Roma children (78.6 percent), compared to 82.5 percent of all children. [6] The trend of growing infant mortality reversed in 2017 (11.9/1000 live births continued to further decline to 5.7/1000 in 2020. Maternal mortality has decreased from 12.7/100.000 live births in 2014 to 5.2 in 2020. Growing numbers of overweight and obesity are notable among school-age children (38.4 percent boys and 32.9 girls are either overweight or obese) in 2017 but there is no data on the likely impact of COVID-19. [5]

Pandemic had an extremely negative impact on the Education system. More than half of teachers in the country report that the number of students struggling to acquire new skills and knowledge has increased. The country also experienced among the longest school closures with students being out of school for 54 weeks compared to the 24-week average for Europe and Central Asia.

Inequities are profound in the area of education rights of children from ethnic minorities. [7] The latest available data suggests that secondary school attendance is concerning among Roma children (60 per cent), while completion rates are 89.9 per cent for Albanian children and only 51.7 per cent for Roma children,[6] Both the 2018 PISA and the 2019 TIMSS results confirmed lower student outcomes for ethnic minorities including girls.

North Macedonia has managed to maintain no children in large scale residential care institutions. The Government redirected resources including for the establishment of foster care
support centers. The number of children in foster care increased from the initial 317 to 332 as per the last data while there are also 104 in kinship care [9].

**Children are increasingly exposed to violence, mirroring the global trends.** Thus, 147 child victims per population of 100,000 children reported by the Public Prosecution, which is 50% increase from 2019. [10] COVID-19 disproportionally affected women especially the most vulnerable. During 2021, partners reported that in the course of four months, out of 250 vulnerable families covered with the assistance, eight (8) cases of GBV were identified and addressed [11].

**The situation of children in contact with the justice system continues to be extremely concerning.** A quadruple increase was noticed in the pronounced educational-correctional measures. The percentage of children at risk to whom assistance and protection measures were applied is 39 percentage points lower compared to the previous year.

**Children with disabilities have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic.** Thus, most services, including day-care centers, remained closed during the first half of 2021. Some of the greatest difficulties that girls and boys with disabilities faced during the pandemic were limited socialization (21.5 %) and limited movement (20.9 %), and 18.3 % faced difficulties respecting the safety measures. [12], [13]

**The legislation concerning youth was improved but opportunities for young girls and boys remain scarce.** New laws and policy were recently adopted, including the Law on Youth Participation and Policies; Youth Guarantee, etc. These new policies are yet to be realized, since two thirds (68%) of young people think that the authorities are not familiar with their problems, and have little confidence to influence local authorities[14]

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[3] Institute of Public Health of North Macedonia
[10] Annual report of the State council for prevention of child delinquency
[14] Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Socio-Political Participation of Youth in North Macedonia: Inequality, Uncertainty and Different Expectations, 2021

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**Major contributions and drivers of results**

UNICEF launched a Multidimensional Child Poverty study to steer programmatic initiatives for addressing multiple layers of child poverty. A first in the Western Balkan utilizing the Alkire-Foster method to develop child age-specific multidimensional poverty indicators, it puts forward the first multidimensional child poverty index in the country encompassing 12 dimensions of child poverty and
27 indicators. Among others, it showed that 12% of children aged 5 to 17 and 9% of children under 5 are affected. Deprivations in education, early child development, nutrition, safety, and love and care are among the top five contributors to child poverty, signaling areas where improvement in public finance allocations and service delivery are most needed. The study provides evidence for the much-needed focus on the most vulnerable groups, including in terms of ethnicity and location. Thus, Roma children are significantly more vulnerable – at least one in three Roma children experience multidimensional poverty, compared to one in nine children in the overall population. The East and the Southeast region have a notable prevalence of multidimensional poverty, while Polog and Skopje regions are also showing high degree of vulnerability. The study ties in wide range of child rights, and provides a common metric, story and advocacy entry point regarding all child-sensitive sectors and topics.

UNICEF supported evidence on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic informed Government’s decision to expand Social protection measures. The 2021 update of the 2020 study on social and economic effects of COVID-19 on children estimated that relative child poverty will increase from 27.8% before the pandemic to 32.4%, putting additional 19,000 children at risk. While the expanded cash transfers contributed to the reduction of extreme child poverty from 1.5% to 0.6%, it is worrying that an estimated 27% of families eligible to take advantage of the relaxed criteria for accessing the key anti-poverty social transfer are not utilizing the assistance. Among other results, UNICEF’s technical support and advocacy contributed to the increased coverage of children from vulnerable families by more than 25,000 which amounts to a significant 18% increase.

UNICEF continues responding to the COVID-19 pandemic utilizing multiple tools and strategies. In collaboration with WHO, UNICEF has supported the Ministry of Health in development of the National COVID-19 Vaccines Deployment plan and has been the main procurement agent through COVAX, assisting in the import of 23% of all COVID-19 vaccines arriving in the country. UNICEF has also coordinated the donation to the MoH of 200K+ masks and boot covers worth 300K USD. As part of COVID-19 response, with mental health issues arising as a new challenge, 200 home visitors (50% of the workforce) and 350 family doctors (30% of the workforce) were trained in basic psycho-social counselling and mental health support. Capacity development of family doctors and home visiting nurses in GBV and inter-sectoral collaboration has further improved the response ability of these primary healthcare professionals.

UNICEF-supported evidence-based communication for social and behavior change contributed to shifting attitudes and beliefs associated with vaccine hesitancy. Using innovation to engage with communities to and increase demand, using behavioral insights and social media listening to design campaigns, track and respond to disinformation, the support contributed to filling an information void during a critical time of the country’s COVID19 vaccine deployment. UNICEF was the first partner to support the Ministry of Health with a “Vaccine Saves Lives” Campaign. Informed by social listening, the campaign aimed to address misinformation that was fueling vaccine hesitancy in the early uptake of COVID19 vaccines and build trust in immunization in general. On television the campaign reached 77% of the adult population. Furthermore, it contributed to a shift in attitudes and beliefs - according to WHO Behavioral Insights Surveys, the number of people who believe a vaccine can help control the spread of COVID-19 increased from 56% in December 2020 to 69% in June 2021. In June, new indicators also showed the number of people who believe COVID19 vaccination is important for their health was 58% and some 89% of the population support general vaccination mandate.

Last but not least, results of the survey of self-efficacy, attitudes and perceptions of health workers on routine immunization has informed translation and adaptation of eight training modules on interpersonal communication skills to increase capacities of the key workforce in communicating with parents and caregivers.

UNICEF was a major partner contributing to strengthened national coordination of COVID-19
risk communication and community engagement (RCCE). Through technical support a cross-sectoral National COVID-19 risk communication and community engagement strategy was updated in the context of COVID-19. The RCCE strategy and plan provided a national roadmap to support COVID-19 vaccine deployment, maintain low transmission, and efforts to reduce the secondary impact in education, protection and the overall socio-economic impact of the pandemic on families. In doing so, UNICEF supported national coordination and facilitated a consultative process that engaged various stakeholders – government, development partners including the UN, public and private sector – in the design of the updated strategy.

Psychosocial support and mental health were among key services in support of vulnerable children and families also to address VAC issues during COVID-19 pandemic. Children, youth, parents and caregivers in the child-care system, including 45 care givers and 100 children were provided with targeted mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) during this year of the pandemic, while advice and information related to psychosocial support was provided through social media, reaching 77,967 people, while immediate and continued counselling was provided to the increasing numbers of vulnerable children and families, particularly women and girls at risk of violence and Roma, through parenting and MHPSS helplines, and mobile teams. Furthermore, in response to the needs of families experiencing hardship during the pandemic, mapping and providing social protection services was ensured for 260 families, 928 people, 487 children at social risk from ten municipalities, by seven mobile teams additionally resulting in 87 families applying for social welfare for the first time.

Bebbo parenting application was adapted to North Macedonia and is ready for the nation-wide roll-out. In support to cross-sectoral parenting initiatives, intensive assistance was provided in adaptation and country contextualization of the Bebbo parenting application that supports everyday parenting efforts of families and caregivers in North Macedonia. Support has been ensured from Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and the Institute of Public Health. The latter was selected as a national entity that will ensure sustainability of the efforts. Over 1600 mandatory content articles and videos in Macedonian and Albanian language are now available to support parents in tracking the milestones, developmental issues, vaccination efforts etc.

Despite an unfavorable social discourse, UNICEF successfully advocated for and led the process of reopening of all schools in September after one of the longest school closures worldwide. In doing so, UNICEF deployed 52 hand washing stations to 15 primary schools across the country and extensively advocated for safety protocols in the re-opened schools.

UNICEF was a key partner in supporting ambitious education reforms in North Macedonia including: 1) school network optimization and funding formula development; 2) curricula and teaching capacities; and 3) educational resources and digitalization; 4) enhanced inclusive education.

In cooperation with the World Bank, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Education and Science to improve the adequacy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity of public spending in primary and secondary education, by helping to overhaul Government transfers to municipalities that fund schools. Incorporated as early as the 2022 national budget, the new funding framework increased primary education transfers to municipalities by US$8 million and US$1.5 million for secondary education. Thanks to the universal nature of the instituted change and the per student allocations for the schools, it will contribute to better access and inclusion of most vulnerable children, including those with disability, ethnic minorities, girls including Roma girls, and children from poorer households. For example, the expanded funding also enabled the introduction of free meals for first through fifth grade students in the next school year, free tablets for students from poorer families including Roma girls, adequate allocations for inclusion of children with disabilities, as well as for teaching in the languages of the smaller ethnic communities. In addition, the new funding formulas provide sufficient funding to schools for adequate maintenance, suitable investment in equipment and teaching aids, professional
training and career development of the school staff, as well as increased number of professional associates. With the reform, by 2026 the funds transferred to municipalities for primary education are projected to increase by 35% and for secondary by 27%, thus constituting a major step forward in bringing the country’s public expenditures on education closer to EU and OECD levels.

**A new Concept for Primary Education supported by UNICEF set foundational changes by incorporating climate change education and gender transformative content and approaches.** The first practical implementation of this Concept came to fruition in the new curricula for grades 1 and 4. UNICEF also supported the capacity development of all 3,000 grade 1 and 4 teachers to apply new pedagogical approaches in implementing the new curricula. Additional webinars to strengthen teachers' capacities to apply innovative teaching methods with focus on digital tools and digital learning were organized for the entire teaching force through the Eduino learning platform. In doing so, UNICEF reviewed the concept with gender lenses and integrated gender equality across curricula content and its visuals, laying the foundation for future transformative changes including demystifying gender stereotypes and promoting inclusion of girls in male occupied fields.

**Maintaining the reform momentum, UNICEF also led the development and printing of all textbooks for Grade 1, the development of digital interactive textbooks for Grade 4 and a platform for their offline and online use (E-Library).** UNICEF also kept building alliances and partnerships to consistently upgrade and expand the entire Eduino initiative. It now offers the single largest repositorium of educational resources all checked and verified by relevant authorities. It also provides the interactive digital textbooks to 4th graders offline and online, free of charge through the E-Library. The Eduino initiative continuously serves over 300,000 users, recorded over 130,000 application downloads and its video lesson repository amassed over 4 million views.

**The national roll-out of the innovative Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programme was completed in all public preschools training, reaching close to 100% of the active pre-school teachers.** UNICEF supported SEL programme continues to help children develop foundational skills that support their future learning outcomes, social interactions, mental health and wellbeing and positive gender socialization. To expand the programme’s reach beyond preschools, UNICEF supported the development of animated and TV content, broadcast nationally and shared online, to reach children who are not attending pre-schools and help create public demand for SEL opportunities.

**The work towards full inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools and preschools retained its momentum.** UNICEF continued supporting the transformation of special schools into resource centers and the capacity development of staff, to provide support to mainstream schools and education assistance as required. Additional efforts were invested in strengthening capacities for inclusion in preschools, while a training package on alternative and augmentative communication and a communicator app are being localized, to support professionals with early identification and intervention.

**Advocacy efforts and technical support continued to result in maintaining zero children in large scale residential institutions in North Macedonia.** This has been achieved despite challenges and backward trends, including growing poverty. UNICEF was a key contributor in the process of establishment of two foster care support centers for the first time in the system, covering the entire country. These new essential additions to the foster and kinship care system are aimed at improving the quality of care, promoting family-based care, and addressing the challenges of reversing the deinstitutionalization process.

**Within the wider Rule of Law reform agenda, UNICEF led the multi-pillar J4C system strengthening reform for the advancement of the rights of children in contact with the justice system.** As a result of the introduced amendments, the improved draft J4C Law and the Criminal Code is expected to significantly enhance the child protection system through better prevention,
rehabilitation and resocialization of children, through intersectoral and trauma-informed response, in line with the children’s best interest. Additionally, UNICEF supported a newly developed, gender sensitive National Strategy on J4C that proposes a comprehensive and pragmatic program of activities to gradually achieve a positive change for children in contact/conflict with the law. For the first time, insights into the underlying societal attitudes and beliefs preventing children from realizing their rights when in contact with the justice system were obtained, exploring the extent to which social norms influence attitudes and practices towards children in contact with the law. Greater participation of children in the J4C system strengthening process was ensured through the newly established J4C programme for child advocates, delivered to 60 children from secondary schools throughout the country, including children from small group homes and educational-correctional facility.

UNICEF was a substantive contributor in developing capacities and legal reforms for advancing ICF-based functional assessment for children and youth children. The support enabled the Public Health Center Skopje to open a new Service for functional assessment of children and youth. UNICEF supported capacity development enabled the Government to establish three new functional assessment bodies, covering the Pelagonija, South-East and Polog regions. In addition, awareness of the new service was raised among parents and service providers in these regions – including centers for social work, schools and kindergartens. To consolidate the provision of functional assessments for children and youth in line with the ICF UNICEF coordinated with relevant institutions the drafting of amendments to the laws on social and child protection, health insurance, healthcare and primary education. These amendments, put on the Parliament’s agenda, along with the establishment of regional assessment bodies will create a single entry-point for children to access support services.

Throughout the year UNICEF continued to engage young people and created meaningful opportunities for children and young people to get involved in communication and advocacy. U-Report was launched and the first round of poll results used to ensure youth voice was incorporated in UNICEF communication and public advocacy for and with children and youth. UNICEF reached out to young people on topics that they genuinely care about, through venues and channels that they use and prefer. Over the course of the year through our social media channels, the re-imagining consultation process, the U-Report polls, and many other programmes, the voice of over 1000 young people was amplified.

Backed by the government and partnerships with young people and the office of the President of North Macedonia the climate change agenda was propelled forward. The Youth Climate Declaration developed by young people including girls from rural municipalities and ethnic minorities, was backed by the President of the country and presented at the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow. This engagement resulted in the President signing the Intergovernmental Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action. By signing the declaration North Macedonia was the first country from UNICEF programme countries in Europe and Central Asia region to pledge to uphold priorities identified by children and youth on climate action.
UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

In 2021, UNICEF led the joint initiative together with UNDP, UNFPA and UN Women on advancing the rights of persons with disabilities through the UNPRPD supported initiative. A cohesive two-year programme was developed and critical evidence was gathered including on the deprivations children and families with disabilities faced during the pandemic. Among other highlights, the analysis reaffirmed the initial hypothesis stemming from the primary and secondary schools that children and youth with disabilities could only partially follow distance learning and did not have adequate resources and support from family members. This and other valuable evidence became pivotal for continued advocacy efforts of UNICEF and the UN agencies in protecting rights of children and families with disabilities.

The partnership with WHO and UNFPA continued to be instrumental in sustaining the perinatal and infant mortality rates in North Macedonia. Backed by the full commitment of the Ministry of Health for the implementation of the jointly developed Perinatal care Masterplan 2030, UNICEF led the component on supporting capacity development of the healthcare staff in neonatal units at Level I and Level II of the healthcare system. As a result, 100% of the workforce (32 neonatologists and neonatal units’ nurses) received critical knowledge in up-to-date standards and procedures for neonatal care.

The partnership with the Cabinet of the President was leveraged to establish key commitments to advance children and young people agenda. Building on a joint Reimagine Youth Consultation Process, the President pledged to champion a Youth Agenda for Action to Reimage the future of education, climate action and quality of life including mental health and signed the Inter-governmental Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action. The partnership with the Cabinet of the President of the country was used to expand audiences and establish new partnerships beyond the national Government including new relationships with parliamentarians and mayors. It was leveraged to expand collaboration in joint efforts to advocate for measures to address multidimensional child poverty, which resulted in the country being invited to become a participant in the Multidimensional Poverty Peer Network.

UNICEF elevated multiple partnerships into an alliance converging on a comprehensive education reform. Seizing the unique opportunity for systematic and comprehensive education reform, UNICEF took on a leading role in creating synergies between the Ministry of Education and the donor community. Together with the World Bank, UNICEF tackled the longstanding issue of a fragmented, inefficient school network and inadequate school funding thus addressing existing inequalities affecting girls, ethnic minorities, children with disabilities. The partnership with the World Bank extended into the development of digital interactive textbooks for Grade 4, and the continuity of professional development of preschool teachers. UNICEF also partnered with USAID and the Open Society Institute to set a benchmark in printing new high-quality textbooks for grade 1 students, in line with the new curricula for Grade 1. To complete the curricular reform with environment and climate change aspects, new partnerships were established with the SIDA, the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning, the City of Skopje and environmental CSOs.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

By building on the partnerships and results of the Eduino initiative UNICEF supported the creation of the first innovative national platform for digital interactive textbooks. Titled E-Library, the platform is part of the continuous expansion and upgrade of the Eduino initiative and currently offers digital interactive textbooks for 4th grade students in 5 local languages. To address the
digital divide especially pronounced for girls and ethnic communities, E-library is also available offline. Similar to the efforts of UNICEF’s global initiative on Learning Passport, UNICEF jointly with the Government saw through a long-term vision for the Eduino Initiative as a central hub for all digital teaching material including textbooks, workbooks, audio narrations, etc. and have them all available to students free of charge. The Government owns the platform and holds the rights to all textbooks available - these multimedia and interactive textbooks will be available to all students free of charge. The online application is supplemented with Android and Windows versions allowing students to access textbooks even in communities with limited internet coverage. Between September and December 2021 just the E-Library applications were downloaded over 130,000 times and used regularly by 27,000 students (more than the entire 4th grade population). The Eduino Initiative has since been recognized by the HundreED annual Global Collection which highlights 100 leading innovations in education around the world.

In 2021, UNICEF negotiated server support for Eduino from the largest telecommunications operator in the country, Telekom. More dedicated expansions were agreed with other donors including: A Digital Literacy programme in collaboration with TeachToday; collaboration with SIDA in advancing climate change education through an Eduino Virtual laboratory; and an Eduino adjunct platform for VET secondary schools funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

**UNICEF supported the development of an innovative index for optimization of the primary school network and its human and other resources, and the drafting of municipal school optimization plans.** The school optimization index measures the gaps for each primary school and municipality to meet the national educational and infrastructural standards, as well as to close the gaps between actual costs per student and costs needed to fulfill the standards. Based on the value of the index, UNICEF supports the preparation of a detailed plan for each municipality for adjusting the infrastructural and educational capacity, while the financial efficiency will be improved with the use of the new school funding formula. The optimization plans identify potential ways to improve the allocation of the limited resources to ensure all primary schools enable teaching in accordance with national standards, laws and educational concepts. The implementation of these plans will: establish an equitable system for primary education; contribute to equal teaching conditions and ensure efficient allocation of resources. These changes will be instrumental in addressing digital divide and other inequalities including those of gender, ethnicity and disability.

**The CRC pre-session enabled the CSOs and UNICEF to unite their voice and inform the Committee about the key issues of child rights in North Macedonia.** Unlike in previous reporting cycles on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the pre-session related to the country’s combined third to sixth reports in front of the Committee on the Rights of the Child was held online. This modality provided opportunities for a much wider participation from the civil society organizations. A particularly positive feature of the process was the coordination and communication among the participants from the CSOs prior to the pre-session which resulted in the development of a joint statement presented to the Committee. The entire process—led by the CSOs and supported by UNICEF - resulted in structured, coherent inputs to the pre-session and the dialogue with the Committee that reflected the complementarity of the roles played by the CSOs and UNICEF, respectively. As such, it enabled UNICEF to highlight issues that are essential to children’s rights and wellbeing in the country, such as the need to enhance the quality of basic social services provided to children, the importance of availability, analysis and use of child-related data in policymaking as well as the criticality of incorporating the equity aspect in addressing children’s rights.

**UNICEF North Macedonia was among the first country offices to finalize an Omega version of the Situational Analysis, incorporating a gender-based lens.** Internally it has served as an example in the HQ-led initiative to simplify the CPD development process, with which this version of the Situational Analysis becomes mandatory. The format’s full alignment with the Convention on the Rights of the Child makes the SitAn a function - rather than a product-that facilitates the monitoring of
child rights and wellbeing in the country. Moving forward, it is envisioned to be utilized as a tool to facilitate reviews of the programme implementation and its progress towards addressing main bottlenecks impeding full realization of child rights.

**Social listening was used beyond its original objective informing social media campaigns to address hesitancy related to the regular immunization.** With the growing use of social media and the pace in which information shapes attitudes and beliefs reaches the public, UNICEF used social listening to develop relevant communication interventions to support the implementation of the national COVID-19 vaccination deployment plan. The campaign focused on addressing the myths and misinformation circulating social media during the early introduction of COVID-19 vaccines. In addition, throughout the year continued social listening has informed additional social media campaigns and established new delivery channels to engage audiences.

Furthermore, in response to the growing challenge of vaccine hesitancy affecting both COVID-19 vaccine deployment and the routine immunization, the country office has been innovatively using behavioral insights and social media listening to design campaigns to address hesitancy, track and respond to disinformation as well as to engage with communities to increase demand. In doing so, the CO used Behavioral insights research completed earlier in 2021 that provided additional information on MMR1 vaccine hesitancy on both demand and the supply side. Five prototypes developed through a design thinking process were finalized and, after evaluation will be scaled up around the country after.