

North Macedonia

Update on the context and situation of children

The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and energy crisis continue to affect North Macedonia's economy. GDP growth slowed down in 2022 to 2.7%, from 3.9% in 2021.[1] North Macedonia's economy has been hit by two large global shocks. While it was still recovering from the pandemic, the outlook deteriorated following war in Ukraine and sharply rising energy and food prices. The 2021 budget deficit of 5.4% of GDP was slightly reduced to 5.1% in 2022 [1]

Sharply rising prices of food and energy have put more people at risk of poverty – both monetary and multidimensional. Households with multiple children and poorer families have been disproportionately affected by the 25% increase in the household price of energy and heating, and the 29% increase in food prices.[2] The increase in food prices exposes these families to greater risk of malnutrition and obesity. The crisis is expected to plunge additional 1,600 children in poverty. [3] As the crisis deepens, the number of children and families falling in poverty could be much higher.

Achieving progress in opening EU accession negotiations dominated the Government's agenda and required difficult political decisions. Combined with the energy crisis, this is expected to result in a shift of the political focus but also substantively reduce the fiscal space including in child-related sectors.

COVID-19 continued to put pressure on the health system. As of January 2023, a cumulative number of 345,603 cases have been registered [4] of which number of positive children is around 2 percent for 0-9 years and 6 percent for 10-19. To date, 46,7% of the population is vaccinated with 2 doses while 8,9% are vaccinated with 3rd booster dose and only 0,6% are vaccinated with the 4th dose. [4]

Key health indicators remain concerning especially for the poorest and ethnic minorities.

The percentage of children who received three doses of DTP3 vaccines fell by 11 percentage points between 2019 and 2021 to 81%. The latest official data (2021) reports the increase of MMR1 to 70.4% and MMR2 - 80.4%. However, the coverage is still low and pose imminent risk for measles outbreak. UNICEF research indicated that women are more likely to make decisions about child vaccination. [5] Despite reversing an increasing trend in perinatal mortality that peaked in 2016 (16/1000 live births), the latest available data - 9.2/1000 live births in 2020 shows the country is still lagging behind as compared to WHO European Region (6.7/1000 live births). [6] The latest evidence on the impact of COVID-19 restrictive measures on children's diet showed weight gain of 20% of children due to schools and kindergartens closures. [7]

Mental health data demonstrates worrisome trends. One in three adolescents experience symptoms of depression, as reported girls being disproportionately affected almost 6 times more likely than boys. [8] Thirty percent of women who were pregnant or delivered in 2020 have also showed signs of depression, impairing their bonding with the newborn. If not addressed, it may increase the risks of abandonment, neglect and violence.

The education system experienced further insecurity in 2022. Despite significant learning gaps exacerbated by the longest pandemic school closures of 54 weeks (2020 to 2022), the education system did not offer remedial teaching for students and continued to face further interruptions: a delayed start of the second semester in January 2022; two weeks of teacher strike; and dozens of fake bomb threats that caused students to miss out on multiple days of education.

The school network contains massive inefficiencies. Currently, 87% of primary education expenditures go to cover the school staff salary costs, leaving insufficient funds for capital expenditures and investing in staff professional development. The number of teachers, predominantly women, has also been on the rise since 2000, while the number of students is in decline. Due to massive organizational inefficiencies, two thirds of all primary schools cover only 7% of students.

North Macedonia maintains no children in large scale residential care institutions. In addition to the two foster care support centers, a third one was established in 2022. The number of children in foster care at the beginning of 2022 is 423 [9]. Despite significant progress, there are still small group homes who accommodate 120 children, mostly children with disabilities and children in contact with the law.

Anecdotal data suggest that parents have traditional attitudes towards gender roles and passively tolerate violence. The latest official data (2021) suggests that 846 children reported as victims of violence. [10]

There was a great system leap forward in the Justice for children system. Amendments to the Criminal Code, Justice for Children Law and Law on Execution of Sanctions were submitted and a Strategy for Prevention and Justice for children was adopted. However, restorative justice, including mediation and alternative measures remain non-existent scarce.

Children with disabilities continue to face lack of support services. The Situation Analysis on Early Childhood Intervention in North Macedonia shows a large inequality in the provision of services, with children in rural areas, minorities and families with low socio-emotional status being dramatically underserved. [11]

The country is facing a declining youth population that remains largely disengaged. The 2021 census revealed that the percentage of people aged 15-29 has declined from 24% to just 18%. While youth related policies are increasingly more comprehensive, their implementation has also revealed massive inequities at local level in terms of participation and skills building.

[1] Ministry of Finance, Macroeconomic indicators, December 2021

[2] State Statistical Office, News Release on the Gross domestic product, third quarter of 2021

[3] Initial UNICEF NM internal analysis based on poverty modelling

[4] Institute of Public Health of North Macedonia, 2022

[5] UNICEF Immunization Country Profile, 2022

[6] WHO European Health Information Gateway, 2022

[7] UNICEF Study on the impact of COVID-19 measures (lockdowns and school closures) on children's diet and nutrition services, 2022

[8] Study on the impact of COVID-19 on mental health among adolescents and their caregivers, 2022

[9] TransMonEE Database, 2022

[10] Annual report of the State council for prevention of child delinquency, 2021

[11] Early Childhood Intervention Situation Analysis in North Macedonia, 2022

Major contributions and drivers of results

In 2022, UNICEF responded to COVID-19 pandemic through multiple interventions. Vaccine hesitancy was addressed through three national multi-media campaigns and two rounds of community engagement events. These have influenced a position of the society that vaccines can control the spread of COVID-19. More than a million people were reached through social media, and increased awareness on importance of routine vaccination to protect children from infectious diseases. Also, by

targeting improvement of the inter-personal communication skills, capacity of the frontline healthcare workers was enhanced to address vaccine hesitancy and increase demand for immunization. With UNICEF support, the three national guidelines for management of COVID-19 patients were developed and applied to ensure quality primary healthcare. Digitalization of the system for home visiting services and its integration in the existing e-health system enabled professional communication of health professionals at all levels, thus saving patients from financial hardships of travel during the pandemic. UNICEF's interventions contributed to the increase of COVID-19 vaccination rates (46.7%, 2nd dose of all population) and more efficient pandemic management.

The reporting year was marked by the generation of critical evidence in the health sector. The Functional analysis of patronage services revealed the shortage of staff and the lack of supportive supervision as the most critical system gap and provided strong grounds for revising policies in this area. The study on the impact of COVID-19 restrictive measures on children's diet showed that 20% of children have gained weight as a result of the schools and kindergarten closures, adding to the already alarming levels of child obesity. The later created a favorable environment to advocate for investments in child nutrition including free of charge school meals and nutrition labelling.

In 2022, UNICEF was instrumental in generating a first-time data on mental health - the study on mental health of adolescents and their families, and the study on mental health of women in the perinatal period. Both studies proved the initial assumptions about worrisome trends and provided strong evidence that informed national systems about the scale of the issues and the urgent need for additional investments in the area of mental health.

Education and social welfare sectors have been progressively involved in responding to mental health issues. Recognizing the untapped potential of the education system to promote mental health, tailored training modules and toolkits on MHPSS for school psychologists were developed, piloted and tested as online modules, offering a self-paced learning resource alongside a verified toolkit. The new cohort of Grade 1 and Grade 4 teachers (3,000) gained new knowledge to implement the new national curricula through training on the importance of good mental health and well-being on increasing students' learning, creativity and productivity. In social welfare, mental health and psychosocial support was provided to nearly 200 beneficiaries through the University Clinic of Psychiatry run helpline, with focus on the most vulnerable children, families at social risk, and gender-based violence survivors. To ensure unified guidance to professionals who operate the helplines, a Manual on providing remote mental health, that also includes gender and ethnic considerations, was produced, based on which capacity building was provided to 20 operators of helplines.

Positive parenting was promoted through a three-prong strategy – policy, online application, and innovative service model. At policy level, a cross-sectoral Parenting Strategy (2022-2030) and costed Action Plan (2022-2024) were developed with UNICEF support. The Strategy ensures systematic approach in provision of parenting support services, resources and initiatives. The strategy is expected to contribute to challenging existing gender norms in parenting and empowering both parents to effectively engage. After extensive adaptation, the Bebbio parenting app was introduced and is currently used by parents and caregivers to monitor and stimulate child development and also discourage gender stereotypes and promote father's role. A campaign to promote the Bebbio parenting application has been conducted – it also included testimonials from fathers, leading in mobilizing over 7000 application users over few months of which 83% are mothers and 14% are fathers. Furthermore, UNICEF supported Parenting Help Line enabled more than hundred parents and caregivers to benefit from structured counselling and referral. Additional 100 families and their pre-birth to pre-school age children, benefited from the Mellow parenting programme.

Inter-sectoral approaches collectively contributed to a measurable progress in ensuring quality and inclusive services for children with disabilities from early age to adolescence. In 2022, UNICEF contributed to the establishment of intersectoral early childhood intervention (ECI) system by

generating critical evidence that enabled identification of system gaps. Among other findings, the ECI analysis revealed large inequalities in the provision of services, as families in the rural areas, minorities as well as families with a low-income status were found to be dramatically underserved. Introduction of trans-disciplinary, child-centered model was supported by UNICEF, promoting individualized approach, and connecting services with ICF assessment bodies.

UNICEF developed national capacities for expansion of the human-rights based model of disability (ICF) and needs assessment of children and youth in four geographic regions. With UNICEF advocacy and support, the amendment to the Healthcare Law was adopted in Parliament, which ensured legal basis for the sustainability and the continued functioning of the functional assessment service, with a national and 10 regional functional assessment bodies for children and youth. This will complete the introduction of the new model as a single-entry point for support services and benefits throughout the country. The expansion of ICF is expected to address the gender gap in beneficiaries of services to support children with disabilities through more frequent and expanded referrals. Furthermore, UNICEF advocated to expand the provision of personal assistants to a wider category of children, not just those with most severe forms of physical disability. The Social Protection Law was thus amended to also allow children and persons with combined disability the right to personal assistants.

As of September 2023, no more children with disabilities will be enrolled in special schools.

UNICEF was a key contributor in strengthening the national capacity on inclusive education covering 1236 members of the school inclusion teams of all 360 primary schools' country wide. In addition, UNICEF supported the development of a new Manual for the Modified Curriculum for Children with Complex Needs thus creating a unified curricula framework across the country. A critical mass of 400 professionals across the country including from preschools and resource centers gained new skills to apply Augmentative and Alternative Communication to help children with complex communication needs to communicate with their peers and caregivers.

An externally conducted evaluation of UNICEF interventions in the area of children with disabilities confirmed the effectiveness of UNICEF strategy. The evaluation concluded that the country office succeeded engaging multiple actors which resulted in policies incorporating children with disabilities and budget allocations to address the needs and to support the children with disabilities and their families. In addition, the evaluation showed that UNICEF-supported interventions contributed greatly to increasing the availability and supply of services as well as qualified human resources and significantly helped to positively shift the paradigm and improve public understanding on disability.

To sustain zero children in residential care institutions, UNICEF invested in promotion of family-based care and general and specialized foster care. This achieved measurable improvements in the following areas: (i) provision of support to foster families by the foster care support centers (FCSC); (ii) knowledge and skills of the centers for social work professionals on the foster care standards. Capacities of 42 centers for social work professionals and FCSC staff were further strengthened. Furthermore, UNICEF proactively supported a Register compiling information on potential, active and available foster families. Capacity building of professionals from the social service workforce included gender specificities in recruitment, training and monitoring of foster families, while the Register compiles disaggregated information on age, gender, disability and ethnic background of the foster families to ensure compatibility in the best interest of the child.

Integrated case management gained new momentum in 2022. UNICEF supported knowledge and tools enabled almost all social work professionals in the country's Centers for Social Work (CSW) to progressively apply integrated case management to respond to complex needs of vulnerable families with children and better manage their workload. This is expected to benefit over 50,000 households that receive social services and benefits through the CSWs. Particular attention was paid to gender

aspects of social work including working with children and mothers who experienced gender-based violence. The delivered casework mentoring program for social work professionals was transferred to the Institute of Social Affairs and is incorporated in the electronic platform for educating social work professionals.

Major progress was achieved in 2022 towards building a system based on a non-punitive and restorative justice approach. The system transformation was promoted through a set of multi-faceted interventions including legislative revision, capacity development, knowledge generation, increased awareness, identification of budgeting bottlenecks and advocacy through child participation. A comprehensive package of legal amendments was developed to harmonize the national system within the international standards, based on the legal gap analysis for the J4C legislative framework conducted in 2021. To further inform this process, recommendations were provided on defining budget allocation to ensure adequacy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity of government budget for J4C. Strategic directions of the J4C system reforms guided by the best interest of the child and EU accession priorities, were sustained through the development and adoption of the inter-sectoral Strategy for Prevention and J4C (2022-2026) designed with participation of children.

A critical mass of J4C professionals benefited through various capacity development interventions. By engaging more than 800 professionals in implementing the trauma informed approach, multisectoral work in the J4C system, UNICEF not only introduced irreversible changes but also triggered a spillover effect in the J4C system, transitioning towards a rights-based child focused system.

UNICEF managed to attract the attention of society at large to the issues of children in contact with the law through the multimedia national campaign “Just a child”. The campaign enabled raising awareness among citizens of the life-time consequences of punitive measures and consequences of adverse childhood experiences. The communication materials were developed based on real experiences of children in conflict with the law and child victims. The campaign was featured in the Global content Spotlight and has 313,546 engagements and 315,783 views.

UNICEF continued to be a key partner of the Government and the World Bank in the area of school funding and reorganization of the primary school’s network. In 2022, UNICEF continued to provide technical support in developing a mid-term vision for transforming the primary school network and improve the allocation of limited resources, so that all primary schools are able to deliver good quality education. UNICEF supported the drafting of 80 municipal plans for optimization of the network of primary schools and commenced work with 10 municipalities to collect and update data needed for the finalization of the optimization plans, as well as consultation with local stakeholders. The new formula for allocating primary education funding of municipalities, developed with UNICEF support, has been publicly endorsed by the government. Among others, the revised formula will re-direct funds towards professional and career development of teacher workforce, currently mostly women. It is also expected that in the long-run the improved remuneration will contribute to closing gender pay gap and attract more men in teaching. The simulations of the fiscal implications of the new school funding formula developed with UNICEF technical support, contributed to increase primary education transfers to municipalities by US\$6 million in the 2023 budget (3%), as envisaged in the base scenario of the simulation for application of the new formula.

UNICEF continued to support curricula reform by providing teachers with effective pedagogical strategies, educational resources, and tools. Special attention in the reporting year was given to student well-being as a significant factor in improving outcomes for learners, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. 25,000 participants (96% of total teacher workforce who predominantly women) gained new knowledge through these professional development opportunities offered through the Eduino platform.

UNICEF developed a replicable model of Social and Emotional Learning for community engagement of students in secondary schools. The programme was modelled in 20 secondary schools with 215 students who worked in teams, mixed by gender and ethnicity, to jointly produce 49 products of visual art, digital games and music acts for social and emotional development of children in preschools. As part of the programme dedicated modules on gender stereotypes, gender and ethnicity-based bias and prejudice as well as nurturing diversity were developed and rolled out. In addition, to help children develop foundational skills that support their future learning outcomes, the core group of 190 peer support pre-school teachers were supported to initiate the establishment of professional learning communities. All results were showcased with an international conference in March 2022 that put into focus the multifaceted interplay between child wellbeing and school attainment.

Through UNICEF supported venues and opportunities adolescents and young people influenced system level changes and advanced their skills. In 2022, UNICEF scale-up existing opportunities for youth participation and empowerment in their overall reach as well as impact. As a result of UNICEF supported venues and tools, young people in the country co-created three major national policies and strategies including: the National Transforming Education Commitment – as part of the Global Transforming Education Summit, the National Development Strategy 2022-2042, and the National Strategy for Prevention and Justice for Children. Young people were engaged through multiple live debates and consultations as well as through U-Report which has increased its base of U-Reporters threefold in this year alone (200 to 920). By the end of the year U-Report was once again used as the primary channel for youth engagement in co-creating the new National Youth Strategy.

UNICEF supported initiatives also placed young people in the position to develop new skills, innovate and implement solutions to challenges in their communities and the country. A total of 465[1] young people from diverse backgrounds (majority of which were girls) actively participated and developed 94[2] innovations and products through four major programmes: UPSHIFT, Generation Unlimited, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Justice for Children (J4C). In doing so, UNICEF actively supported the engagement of girls in STEM, equipping them with the necessary skills and attitudes for social innovation and entrepreneurship.

UPSHIFT programme focused on youth-led solutions to environmental challenges in the areas of water, air, and energy. 150 young people of which 65 percent were girls, participated in these thematic UPSHIFT cycles, implemented in partnership with the Fund for Innovation and Technological Development. Out of the 30 developed solutions, 15 received seed funding and were implemented in communities. Furthermore, for the first time a crowdfunding initiative was implemented by the young people themselves to complement the seed funding. Some of these solutions with minor adaptations have a great potential beyond the country. They are aimed to tackle water usage efficiency, energy conservancy and air pollution. It is also expected that knowledge gained through thematic, environment focused UPSHIFT cycles would trigger an interest in environmental science and eco entrepreneurship especially among girls.

[1] 215 in SEL, 150 Upshift, 60 J4C and 40 in GenU

[2] 49 products in SEL, 30 UPSHIFT solutions, 10 GenU and 5 J4C

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Partnership with UNDP, UNFPA and the UN RC was key in formulating and broadly consulting government commitments as part of the Transforming education summit. UNICEF supported the Government in developing the National statement of commitment by engaging over 600 stakeholders in consultations. Their vision on how to recover pandemic-related learning losses and reimagine education were factored in the national statement of commitment.

Partnership with UNHCR enabled continuous professional development of social service workforce. UNICEF partnered with UNHCR to strengthen competencies, qualifications, certification and professional promotion of social service workforce, by using the digital environment. The partnership resulted in the establishment of a Digital Learning Platform, in permanent ownership of the government.

The second joint UNPRPD programme was initiated in 2022 by UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA. UNICEF led component of early intervention services resulted in an agreed policy proposal re-defining the system for early childhood interventions, including the role of each sector in the process thus ensuring child-centered transdisciplinary approach.

The initiative to reform primary education funding and optimize the school network has deepened the strategic partnership with the World Bank. This has manifested not only in increase of funding for UNICEF but also in joint advocacy with the World Bank for adoption of the new formulas for primary and secondary education funding. UNICEF has utilized the opportunity of communications with the mayors to also advocate for keeping the schools open and warm during the energy crisis.

UNICEF maintained its productive partnerships with the Fund for Innovation and Technological Development and the Telekom Foundation. The Fund is covering 50% of the costs for the entire UPSHIFT programme, and the Telekom Foundation funds the Generation Unlimited Challenge and a campaign to combat cyberbullying. As part of the third Generation unlimited, over 127 young people applied with solutions to mitigate climate change. The best 5 solutions received seed funding. These include: an application of swaps and trades and a smart trash bin that is sorting waste in preparation for recycling.

For the first time UNICEF partnered with the Football Federation of Macedonia to promote inclusion and non-discrimination. The partnership included a joint multimedia campaign under the slogan 'One team for children's rights' with football players from the national teams and children from various background, sharing together positive messages of equality and inclusion for every child.

Partnership with CSOs enabled inclusion of UNICEF supported priorities in the UN CRC concluding observations. UNICEF and CSO inputs provided to the UN CRC Committee and the European Commission related to the situation of children in the country have been included in the UN CRC Committee Concluding Observations and the EU Country Report providing a space for advocacy actions for their implementation.

In 2022, UNICEF and UNDP offices in North Macedonia won the “Green Shark” Global Innovation Challenge. This innovation is expected to establish a biohacking lab in North Macedonia. It focuses on biowaste as an entry point in creating educational and entrepreneurial opportunities for a greener future that can be scaled up across the country and region.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

UNICEF utilized climate change as an entry point to expand experiential learning practices thus contributing to both quality education and environmental sustainability results. More than 100 teachers, mostly women from schools across the country gained new knowledge on integrating experiential learning activities for climate change and environment in preschool and primary education. Over 10,000 children (8% of total children in that age range) experienced these activities guided by the teachers. It is expected that experiential learning in the long run will be a foundational process to contribute to the increasing number of female environmental scientist and engineers as part of the green economy transition. Handbook with the experiential learning activities for environment and climate change for preschool and primary education was developed and adapted for children with disabilities (hearing and visual impairments, and developmental delays). It was also observed that children with disabilities were actively involved in the experiments making experiential learning a strong tool to support their inclusion. In addition, the framework for the network of science centers was developed to support the implementation of science curricula in the education system based on experiential learning thus also supporting girls in STEM agenda.

Early intervention for children with disabilities was promoted by the introduction of localized version of Cboard communicator. In 2022, UNICEF adapted and launched localized versions of the communicator Cboard, a free digital application that offers children, parents, teachers and therapists the ability to create communication boards using a range of symbols or other personalized images with added labels in the language required. Users then create messages that are read out using local language text-to-speech engines in Macedonian and Albanian. The app can be used in many settings, starting from the child's family and preschool, early intervention centers, schools, resource centers and speech therapy services, to support the early childhood development and inclusion of children with disabilities, from preschool education onwards. Cboard and the capacity-development of professionals on using alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) have helped professionals re-consider the communication approach, how it can be stimulated and assisted, emphasizing the importance of early identification and early intervention.

Inclusion of young people from the Educational correctional facility in a joint initiative with other children greatly contributed to efforts of changing punitive behaviors amongst professionals. During 2022 a tailored J4C programme for child and youth advocates was developed in which 60 youth, including ones from small group homes and correctional facilities – who are overrepresented by boys from ethnic minorities, especially Roma - were trained to strengthen their advocacy skills and innovate new mechanisms and solutions that facilitate access and quality of J4C. Among others, the above approach also contributed to the discontinuation of the sentence of children from correctional facility, and four out of five young people (from a total of 18 young people in the ECF) that were included in the programme were released in the course of the programme as their participation was used as an additional argument by the professionals when issuing a positive opinion for release. Their participation in high-level stakeholder events with Ministers, the Ombudswoman for children, prosecutors, judges, social workers led to professionals advocating for the initiatives that the children have presented.

Multi-sectoral intervention in response to the needs of Afghan evacuees temporarily relocated to North Macedonia enabled the detection of systemic gaps and access the response capacities of CSOs to possible refugee crisis. Responding to an urgent request to support Afghan evacuees in North Macedonia, UNICEF developed and successfully implemented an extremely complex yet inter-sectoral programme to Afghan children and women ensuring their health, education, and protection services including psycho-social support and legal assistance. Thanks to the great partnership with the donor – USAID, the programme underwent numerous adjustments to adapt to fluctuating number of beneficiaries and varying support schemes from their employees-US CSOs, in ensuring the most relevant support to the needs of Afghan population. There were targeted activities aimed at prevention

and response of gender-based violence, including focus group discussions, MHPSS sessions, development of guidelines for prevention of GBV and an integrated program with gender/age/disability specifications for established child and youth-friendly spaces. While the inter-sectoral programme in response to Afghan evacuees cannot be compared with large-scale response programmes the lessons learned during the implementation especially those related to ensuring 'continuum of support' for children on the move irrespective of jurisdiction i.e country, were shared regionally and will be further used to inform the organizational experience on that matter.

Recognizing the negative effects of pandemic on routine immunization, UNICEF proactively supported the national systems to increase vaccine uptake. Anecdotal evidence suggests that COVID-19 seriously disrupted the routine immunization system during the past 2 years. UNICEF supported the development of catch-up immunization strategy, multimedia campaigns, social and behavioral interventions to ensure access to vaccine to every child. When designing the national campaign UNICEF purposely targeted mothers through the messaging and delivery methods considering the evidence of their decision-making role in vaccination. Among others, the interventions included an online social listening component and an expert panel made up of key members of relevant national committees, media representatives and fact checkers. The expert panel analyzed findings of online social listening and developed engagement recommendations to respond to emerging issues. Based on the practical application of the system, a strategy on how to integrate the misinformation management within the work of national institutions was developed. Lessons learned through these engagements suggest that campaigns and demand side interventions should go together with efforts to build capacities of national authorities to address vaccine hesitancy and be based on current behavioral insights to increase chances of influencing decision making. The integrated approach provided credibility to support advocacy on the need for strengthening national systems to address vaccine hesitancy with the National Immunization Committee agreeing to formalize the misinformation management system.