

Romania

Update on the context and situation of children

Romania has a resident population of 19 million (National Institute of Statistics (NIS), 2023), 3.74 million of whom are children. Despite notable progress achieved across social sectors over the years, important child rights challenges, deprivations and inequities remain. Over 49 per cent of children live in rural areas, with lower living standards and more precarious access to quality social services compared to the urban population. Nearly one third of children in Romania are affected by severe material and social deprivation. Romania has the highest rate of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the European Union (41.5 per cent), nearly twice higher than the EU average (24.7 per cent, Eurostat 2022).

Political economy

Romania was reclassified as a high-income country in 2022. However, the economic growth has been lower than in previous years at 1.7 per cent in early 2023, with the general state deficit projected at 6.3 per cent of GDP. The country continued to face challenges related to weak institutions, shortages of skilled workforce, poor digitalization, low resilience to natural hazards and the effects of climate change resulting in growth not being inclusive and sustainable economically as well as environmentally.

As an EU member, Romania benefits from the EU normative framework and notable financial instruments: European Social Fund (ESF), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) are among the instruments aimed at rendering the economy and society more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for shocks. The EU Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) supports the country implement reforms and investments in line with the EU priorities localized through Romania's Recovery and Resilience Plan. The Plan addresses specific challenges of Romania with the focus on sustainable growth through investments in sustainable transport, building renovation, biodiversity protection, industry decarbonization and deployment of renewables, digitalization of public administration and public services and improvement of healthcare and education sectors considering regional disparities.

Romania is implementing the European Child Guarantee to improve access to basic services particularly for the most vulnerable children. As Romania has the highest rates of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion within the EU, the adoption of the Action Plan marks an important step forward, with the declared commitment to reduce the number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 500,000 by 2030, thereby contributing to the overall EU target of five million children. The plan foresees an investment of EUR 19 billion until 2030, mostly from EU funds, to improve the situation of children.

Romania and the war in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine forced over 4.5 million persons (UNHCR, December 2023) cross borders into Romania from either Ukraine or the Republic of Moldova and has had a major impact on Romania. The government continued, with international support including UNICEF's, to provide essential services and cash assistance to refugees from Ukraine, following the implementation of the National Response Plan launched in 2022, which defined a wide range of interventions across sectors to ensure access to protection, healthcare, education and housing for children, young people and vulnerable persons from Ukraine. The Plan aimed at the realisation of refugees' socio-economic rights during their stay in Romania and at fostering social cohesion with host communities, under the broader framework of the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive. Although the refugee situation somewhat stabilised in 2023, multiple challenges persist. Integration and social inclusion of refugees into education and social services, especially in cases of aggravated vulnerabilities – families with many children, the elderly, people with disabilities, families with social history coming from the most

affected areas in Ukraine – require more targeted and varied assistance from the national systems, which are already overstretched and do not always cope even with the caseload and vulnerabilities faced by the Romanian citizens.

After the initial months of the food and housing support programme, the Government of Romania with technical support from UNICEF, revised its approach to foster support to refugees and promote social inclusion. To this end, enrolment in the national education system and employment were introduced as conditionalities to access support. These actions had a mixed effect on the refugee population. On the one hand, these boosted school enrolment and employment rates, on the other hand, such measures posed additional challenges to already vulnerable groups, such as single-headed households, children with third party care, child victims of domestic abuse, families with children with disabilities, mothers with little children, etc).

Romania in international treaties

2023 was marked by several important milestones for Romania as a member state to international treaties and conventions. The UN Committee for the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) provided the Government of Romania with the List of Issues Prior to Reporting. UNICEF shared a written submission with the UN CRC and supported a Children’s Report for the first time. The Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review adopted the report on Romania, confirming a fundamental commitment of the country to promoting and protecting human rights.

Romania presented its Voluntary National Review (VNR) to the UN General Assembly which also featured a children’s report on seven SDGs and demonstrated a good practice of child participation in decision making.

All the above played an important role in UNICEF’s interaction with the Government of Romania and other stakeholders to advance the realization of child rights in the country and ensure access of the most vulnerable populations, including refugees from Ukraine to essential services.

UNICEF has employed a wide array of strategies to support the government’s effort towards the realization of child rights – from strategic partnerships and technical assistance to capacity strengthening for county and local authorities to access and implement the European instruments and funds for social and economic development, as well as the use of innovation and digitalisation.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Every child survives and thrives

In 2023, the public health sector in Romania saw important policy developments as the National Health and Immunization Strategies 2023–2030 were adopted. Through technical assistance and evidence generation, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MoH), National Public Health Institute (NIPH) and the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF played an important role in advancing the national health policy framework and strengthening the primary healthcare system, including through capacity strengthening of primary healthcare and hospital professionals, to address systemic bottlenecks and negative trends affecting children and their families.

In response to Romania’s persistent, among EU-highest, infant mortality rates (5.2 per 1,000 live births, Eurostat, 2021), UNICEF focused on ante-natal and post-natal care services thereby addressing, inter alia, underlying gender dimensions of the phenomenon (for example, teenage pregnancies remain at a worrying level of 7,345 for age group 15-19, 2022, NIPH).

As regards immunization, notable concerns remain despite commendable policy developments. In late 2023, a measles epidemic was declared in Romania. Measles and rubella vaccination rates remained unchanged below the WHO targets (MMR first dose vaccination coverage at 78 per cent and second dose at 62 per cent), a persistent downward trend. Thus, UNICEF collaborated with 11 County Health Authorities to incorporate costed vaccination plans into the National Immunization Strategy.

Furthermore, UNICEF-supported interpersonal communication packages were set for inclusion in the future vaccination certification partnership with 11 Local Public Health Authorities, and the National

Public Health Institute.

UNICEF contributed to systemic improvements by strengthening the health workforce through capacity development and digital solutions for inter-sectorial interventions and public health functions within a regional multi-country project. The national health system readiness was assessed and opportunities were identified to integrate interpersonal communication for immunization in the pre-service and in-service curriculum of healthcare workers.

UNICEF continued to develop and support digital solutions for health. One example is the new Community Health Nurses application, which has full ownership of MoH and is strengthening inter-sectorial interventions at local levels. Further, electronic immunization records developments continued alongside capacity building of health professionals on the use of the National Electronic Registry for Vaccination, thus contributing to timelier availability of reliable data for better monitoring, planning and forecasting.

Local-level modelling and provision of integrated services encompassing, inter alia, health continued in 2023 – contributing to bridging policy design, evidence generation and implementation. UNICEF tested innovative solutions (e.g. virtual integrated community centres) to model pathways to reaching the most vulnerable children. Coordination gaps between the central and sub-national governance levels, however, persist. Overall, capacities for developing and implementing evidence-based policies and service integration remain in need of further strengthening.

In the context of the Ukraine refugee crisis, access of refugees to healthcare services remained hindered by structural obstacles, such as administrative issues, communication (language barriers), and differences between health protocols. UNICEF worked with partners, including social and behaviour change dimensions, to reach Ukraine refugees with essential health services and referrals, vaccination and counselling. Over 8,300 vulnerable children and women from Ukraine received primary healthcare services, including via an innovative partnership with Regina Maria Foundation.

Mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS) services – including for adolescents as a distinct category of beneficiaries – is increasing in prominence as a cross-cutting area. This is critical to responding to children's needs as 22,000 children in Romania are diagnosed with mental health conditions presently and adequate quality initiatives around mental health prevention and well-being are unavailable for most children and adolescents.

Every child learns

UNICEF supported the Government in addressing persisting challenges in education. State budget allocation to education at 3.2 per cent remained nearly twice lower than stipulated by the Education Law. Participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) remained significantly lower compared to the EU average rate (75.6 per cent vs EU average of 92.5 per cent, EUROSTAT, 2021). Children in rural areas and Roma children were particularly affected. A high rate of early leavers from education and training persisted (15.6 per cent compared to the EU average of 9.6 per cent, EUROSTAT, 2022).

In 2023, Romania adopted a new Law on Pre-university education introducing the concept of Quality Inclusive Education and a dedicated section on School Desegregation, both developed with UNICEF support. The Law provides a foundation for guaranteeing a more equitable education in Romania, incorporating UNICEF-promoted and tested measures, including a national programme for the prevention of school dropouts; a new support system for children with disabilities, and a system for identification of education priority and areas for investment, which identifies the most-in-need schools. UNICEF efforts were instrumental to the revision of legal and policy framework – including with regards to the inclusion of migrant and refugee children in education. Updated Early Learning and Development Standards will form the basis for the development of the graduate profiles for early years – introduced for the first time. In further support of the ECEC agenda, 'Learning through Play' was included as a priority for school year 2023/2024 in the Methodological Annual Letter to guide the activity of ECEC professionals. UNICEF adapted, launched and promoted the Bebo App, an innovative tool aimed at primarily parents and caregivers of young children. It so far reached 24,316 active users and keeps on growing.

UNICEF contributed to the methodology for the enrolment of ante-preschoolers, preschoolers and

students exceeding the generic limit per classroom; case management procedure in cases of violence against pre-schoolers, students and school staff, and suspected violence against children outside the school environment. As regards the education policy, the National Strategy on Parenting was updated after several years of review and will be proposed for adoption in the first quarter of 2024.

UNICEF, through the European Commission Technical Support Instrument, contributed to combat school desegregation, severely affecting the education rights of Roma children, in particular, with the development of a regulatory framework on school segregation. It is being promoted as a promising practice at the EU level – particularly in Slovakia.

UNICEF modelled innovative tools for promoting inclusion of children with special educational needs by strengthening institutional capacity for their inclusion in education at the county and local level, such as through assistive technologies for students with hearing impairments and speech and language disorders, and a toolkit designed to enable teachers in mainstream schools to better meet the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities.

In the context of the continued Ukraine refugee response, UNICEF facilitated the enrolment of an additional 28,370 children from Ukraine and the provision of non-formal education, including early learning, to 12,251 children through alternative and complementary learning pathways, including or combining inclusion into Romanian schools, online learning, and non-formal education modalities alongside the provision of MHPSS. This ensured learning continuity and bridging education gaps of children from Ukraine and enhanced social cohesion.

Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

In 2023, the number of children in the special protection system continued to decrease, standing at 40,066 according to the latest available data (NAPCRA). About a quarter of children in public care live in residential care, mostly children with disabilities. The number of children without parental care due to work migration of caregivers continued to decrease to 71,152 (June 2023). 81,328 children with disabilities were registered (June 2023), while their real number is believed to be higher as many remain invisible and out of reach of vital services, facing increased vulnerabilities and discrimination. A total of 9,035 cases of child abuse, neglect and exploitation were reported (June 2023); prevalence was estimated to be far higher.

UNICEF-tested innovative tool for community teams, Aurora successfully transitioned towards the National Child's Observatory, now part of a new management information system (MIS) as the main component of case management of children. In another step forward, as of June 2023, the legal framework was created for the functioning of the new MIS and National Child's Observatory.

Similarly, the progressive handover to the authorities is ongoing also for Primero, another data-driven tool for case management and evidence-based planning. Aurora and Primero enabled a catalysed digital transformation in the child protection sector resulting in improved case management and availability and systematization and disaggregation of data – with the focus on the most vulnerable children and contributed significantly to institutional capacity strengthening to generate and use data. In line with UNICEF's core priority to strengthen the Social Service Workforce, a UNICEF-supported census of social service workforce was finalized and disseminated. The evidence and findings are used to advocate for the increase and more equitable and need-based distribution of social service workforces, and to promote the development, costing and testing of an incentivized package for social workers to work in remote rural areas.

Preparatory activities for the institutional-led nationwide scale up of UNICEF's model of integrated services at local level (Minimum Package of Services) is undergoing, including through the direct support to 800 rural municipalities for accessing EU-funding for the implementation of the programme. Operational evidence on developing Integrated Community Centres (ICCs) as integrated service delivery points in the most structurally disadvantaged areas is available for replication and shared with 200 municipalities for national scale-up. Tested solutions and resources include local needs analyses, local action plans, integrated methodology for interventions, the ICC internal regulations, job descriptions, communication plans for demand creation, feedback mechanisms from children and parents, and a set of lessons learnt.

2023 was marked by efforts to progressively reduce UNICEF's direct support to Romania's Ukraine

refugee crisis response services that benefitted at least 70 thousand people, to be increasingly handled by local authorities. UNICEF led the ‘Blue Dot to Blue Grid’ approach conceptualisation and supported the initial transition, aiming to ensure a bridging of humanitarian and development programming, sustaining the continued refugee response and strengthening the capacities and coordination of local authorities for overall improved emergency preparedness and response. This allows for a holistic response to the needs of all vulnerable children, including the referral to a network of services.

The Ukraine refugee crisis brought, inter alia, increased risks of child trafficking, exploitation and abuse – particularly to vulnerable children on the move. While comprehensive prevention and response to child trafficking remain in need of further work, UNICEF and partners’ efforts led to increased recognition by justice institutions to prioritize trauma-informed, child-friendly and gender-sensitive forensic investigation techniques in cases of sexual violence against children. The capacity strengthening initiative of the law enforcement sector, including the roll out of a Training of Trainers programme, meant that 70 police officers and prosecutors in 21 counties were trained with improved skills in forensic interviewing of boys and girls. This resulted in over 100 hearings of cases of SGBV conducted in line with international and national child rights standards. While only one component of its work, this forms part of broader efforts in line with UNICEF’s Gender Action Plan 2022-2025 to ensure that girls and boys enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections.

Every child lives in a safe and clean environment

In 2023, UNICEF Romania redoubled efforts to bring climate action and sustainability to the forefront of its programme in Romania. The continuing engagement with the National Student’s Council and UNICEF-supported Children’s board empowered children and youth to be vocal in emphasizing climate issues as a top priority for young Romanians.

UNICEF Romania, as a leading youth mobilizer over multiple years, ensured that the voice of children was heard during the COP28, by facilitating the participation of a member of the UNICEF-supported Children’s board in the UNICEF Global youth delegation at the COP28.

Based on a strengthened interest and commitment by national authorities and partners including by the President’s office, the Minister of Environment and the Minister of Education, UNICEF has initiated a climate landscape for children analysis, as an essential step to identifying core systemic challenges as well as entry points for future action.

UNICEF’s engagement with the Department of the Emergency Situations has led to a revision of the National Disaster Risk Reduction framework, promising to make it more child-focused.

All these initiatives are being supported through engaging adolescents from Romania and Ukraine as agents of change and multipliers in their communities.

Every child has an equitable chance in life

As significant milestones, the Child Rights Strategy 2022-2027 and EU Child Guarantee Action Plan 2030 were approved. This marked a major step towards reducing child poverty and social exclusion, considering the highest in Europe children and youth poverty and severe material and social deprivation rates. UNICEF’s advocacy, technical support for policy planning and implementation, and cross-sectoral support have been instrumental throughout the process. UNICEF has provided technical assistance for development of a conceptual framework for budget planning, expenditure tracking and M&E for the Child Guarantee National Action Plan and now supports the NAPCRA as national coordinating council for the Child Guarantee.

Together with the key government counterparts involved in evidence generation and analysis, UNICEF ensured a robust monitoring of the situation of children in Romania. Thus, with UNICEF technical support, the Working Group (WG) on Data reviewed the child-related data availability and gaps and explored ways to address them by strengthening coordination between different institutions, promoting alignment with internationally agreed indicators and data sharing between key stakeholders.

Strengthening the child-friendly local governance within the Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) framework, the capacity of national and local bodies in six localities was strengthened to lead, facilitate and coordinate development and implementation of Action Plans – all with a view to placing child

rights at the centre of local governance. Child rights situation analyses identified the key child-related issues at local level and five two-year local action plans were developed, thereby offering a strong basis for coordinated systemic action.

Children's Local Councils as formal consultative structures nearby the elected mayors and local councils, actively involved in the decision-making process on child-related issues. Children's proposals were integrated into the approved local budgets 2023 and were being implemented. Children participated at national, European and international consultations/events (e.g. Children's Report for the Romania's Voluntary National Review; Green Cities Forum in Brasov; Council of Europe report on child participation) and had their capacity developed on combating school drop-out, bullying, media education, independent living skills, public speaking, combating drug and alcohol abuse.

Government decisions on the state's financial support to refugees (including integration) were informed through a joint UN (UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM) evidence generation and advocacy.

Another joint UN undertaking was to support the Government efforts to set up an information mechanism for the Ukrainian refugees (a call centre covering health, education, employment, and social protection) and to improve accountability to the affected communities. UNICEF developed its first strategy for accountability to affected population (AAP), to be employed in all programmes considering accountability to all vulnerable groups, and goes beyond emergency responses.

UNICEF and the World Bank collaborated to offer a policy brief and two complementary assessment reports on shock-responsive social protection, the key findings and recommendations of which were presented together with the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity. As a result, key counterparts, representing both the government and civil society, unanimously agreed with the need for strengthening the preparedness and adaptability of the national social protection system to shocks.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Building on the longstanding excellent partnership and engagement with the Prime Minister Office, line ministries and UN Agencies – UNHCR, WHO, WB, IOM within the closely-aligned frameworks of the Governments Plan of Action and the inter-agency Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP), UNICEF continued support to strengthening the national systems – to improve inclusion and access to services, and accountability to most vulnerable populations, including refugees from Ukraine. The local-level efforts were aimed at expanding the existing flagship interventions and initiatives, such as Minimum Package of Services (MPS) and Child Friendly Cities and linking them to broader vulnerable groups.

Strengthened partnerships with the Parliament, Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests, Ministry of Internal Affairs Department for Emergency Situations, and the World Bank are being forged to catalyse UNICEF's engagement in the areas of climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction and social protection.

UNICEF strengthened its partnerships, including as technical assistance provider and for broader advocacy on child right agenda, with embassies (Japan, Korea, USA, UK, France, Spain, Sweden, Austria, Norway, Italy, Japan, Ukraine, the Gulf countries) and the close engagement with several UNICEF National Committees, which were particularly supportive during the Ukraine war (US, UK, Austria, Germany, France, Belgium, Denmark) and helped both with global fundraising as well as awareness raising efforts around the needs and rights of vulnerable children and families in Romania, including the refugees from Ukraine.

UNICEF's partnerships with IFIs (WB, CEB, EIB) intensified further in 2023, pinpointing joint avenues to jointly foster social inclusion, increasingly shock-responsive social protection and the integration of refugee children into the national education and health systems.

In 2023, the number of partnerships at national and subnational level in which UNICEF engaged following the onset of war in Ukraine, continued to be at a historically high level. However, the type and reach of these partnerships changed to address the most pressing needs of the refugees, with a view to focus on the nexus between a system strengthening and emergency response nexus approach. Thus, along with the ongoing partnerships with national civil society, UNICEF significantly expanded the network of partner local authorities – mainly child protection, social assistance and education entities along with county councils and municipalities, to support ongoing need for protection and growing demand for mainstream schooling for refugee population. This resulted in 19 new formal partnerships with local authorities in municipalities and counties that supported the emergency response for over 60,000 refugees (about 72 per cent of the total Ukrainian refugee population in Romania) providing access to services for 131,460 in total. In conjunction with direct support offered to refugees via a total of 24 civil society partner organisations, greatly expanded the reach of UNICEF's interventions. UNICEF continues to work with national and local civil society to strengthen their capacities, through contingency planning for optimal preparedness for future crises.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Many lessons of 2023 come from almost two years of the response to the Ukraine refugee crisis in Romania as well as from the first year of implementation of the 2023-2027 programme of cooperation with the Government of Romania.

Nexus and sustainability

In helping conceptualize and execute the response to the Ukraine refugee crisis in Romania, UNICEF adhered to broader response frameworks, focusing on understanding and addressing the journeys and needs of Ukrainian refugees. At the outset of the crisis, UNICEF quickly proved to be a key player, capable of mobilizing, convening, and guiding partners to adapt and sustain the response to the evolving needs of children and families transitioning from conflict to safety and from immediate needs to social inclusion.

UNICEF views delivery through national systems as a crucial element, integral to its vision and response to the Ukraine refugee crisis in Romania. Actively collaborating with the Romanian government, UNICEF ensured refugees' access to guaranteed rights and protection. Leveraging its longstanding presence in Romania, UNICEF swiftly adjusted programming at the crisis onset, playing a vital role beyond child and adolescent needs. Coordinated efforts with partners have sustained a comprehensive service network, benefitting an estimated 450 thousand people through Blue Dots, safe spaces, and service hubs. While local authorities played a key role, their involvement posed risks due to system imperfections.

Going further, it is essential to continue building on the opportunities created by the crisis, especially the expanded partnerships with local authorities and municipalities and their keen interest to the child rights agenda and to scale the tested approaches, such as integrated programming at local level (ICCs and MPS) for systemic results. The Blue Grid approach for example aims to improve accessibility to quality services provided by accredited service providers, through consolidated communication and coordination between the public authorities, NGOs and other relevant authorities. Thus, UNICEF will continue to focus on progressively handing over key activities to local authorities. Internally, UNICEF successfully sharpened its focus on integrating gender equality approaches and results across the life course through all its programmes, including health, education, child protection and social policy, as evidenced by the UNICEF Romania Gender Action Plan.

Preparedness

Another lesson coming from the analysis of the refugee response is related to the importance of preparedness, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation frameworks with a dual perspective: i) emergency preparedness of Romania within the European context along with other countries – for better coordination and exchanges; and ii) internal readiness to respond to potential crises from the equity aspect. While the EU broader frameworks have been vital in setting expectations and guidelines for delivery of the refugee response, the EU status does not guarantee seamless functioning of the state systems. Furthermore, resource mobilization, leveraging Romania's EU membership for funds offers challenges, including the misconception that all needs are met.

Importance of evidence and use of data

The availability of disaggregated quality data remains a challenge. Emphasizing the significance of data and its efficient utilization across different fields and situations is crucial for enhancing the implementation of the UNICEF country programme and realization of the rights of the child. This ensures optimal allocation of resources to areas of greatest need, thereby maximizing their effectiveness. In particular, there is a recognised need to more systematically address mental health needs, including on understanding the scope of prevention, promotion and service needs. In health, a need for government-owned longitudinal surveys and research to enable data analysis for identification of trends and patterns, offering insights into changes over time is highly needed. This would allow to inform decision-making for improved health outcomes. Similarly, for social protection an assessment of the current status of existing protection schemes and their impact is needed to formulate policies, strategies, and plans. Furthermore, in sectors like public administration, healthcare, and education, improved data would form the basis to optimize resource allocation. In pursuit of this objective, UNICEF has underscored the necessity for an expanded data initiative scheduled to begin in early 2024. This initiative will involve engaging in pertinent discussions with government and civil society counterparts to drive progress, foster innovation, and facilitate positive transformations.