



UNICEF 2020 RESULTS
For Children in Montenegro

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UNICEF 2020 RESULTS FOR CHILDREN IN MONTENEGRO

During the course of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on children, adolescents and young people in Montenegro, exacerbating existing equity gaps and highlighting systemic weaknesses.

As a result of the health and socio-economic crisis, children have become more vulnerable to poverty, violence and social exclusion and less able to acquire the knowledge and skills required for a smooth transition to adulthood. As schools closed, education went digital and access to social services was reduced, and the impact of COVID-19 was particularly felt by the country's most vulnerable children and youth.

A Rapid Social Impact Assessment by the UN, co-led by UNICEF and UNDP, found that in April and June the country's poorest households were increasingly unable to meet their children's most basic needs - particularly affecting Roma and Egyptian children, children with disabilities and refugee and migrant children. Others were also affected as COVID-19 infections and job losses sent families spiralling into poverty. Specifically, the assessment noted: increased gender-based and family violence; a growing need for help purchasing food and hygiene items and making utility payments; the inability of large



numbers of children to continue their education due to a lack of computers and internet connections; and an unmet need for mental health support for children and adolescents.

In addition, restrictions required to combat the pandemic led to a reduction in critical social services and heightened reluctance by the population to seek health services, including for childhood vaccinations - for which demand was already trending dangerously downward. The vulnerability of children with disabilities was exacerbated by limited access to services, while their parents faced increased challenges when day-care centres were discontinued.

UNICEF's efforts to mitigate against the impact of the pandemic prioritized four areas: poverty, health, education, and violence against children. With support from international partners and in collaboration with government and civil society organizations, UNICEF addressed the following results for children in Montenegro:

The challenge: More households being pushed into poverty

Children living in poverty, with disabilities and from marginalized communities are being left behind. World Bank data reveals a 15 per cent decline in economic activity in 2020 - the sharpest downturn in the region.

The pandemic will certainly increase poverty in Montenegro, reversing recent trends. Up to 20,000 citizens could become newly impoverished, more than 80 per cent of whom lack social protection. More than one third (34%) of Montenegro's children lived in poverty prior to COVID-19- according to MONSTAT's at-risk-of poverty measurement (SILC), the poverty line for a four-person household including two adults and two children is €395.6 per month. A 2020 multi-dimensional child poverty analysis found that 37 per cent are deprived in three or more dimensions, including areas such as health, nutrition and education. Only 10 per cent of children (14,028) receive a child allowance; the total annual budget for child allowances represents less than 0.1 per cent of GDP (2019). Limited access to services and problems with accessing learning is



particularly affecting children with disabilities. Children from marginalized households (e.g., Roma and Egyptian, refugees, migrants and asylum seekers) whose income depends heavily on the informal sector became impoverished during the lockdown, further limiting access to social services.

“There are seven of us, and the house is in bad condition. Sometimes, when the winters are cold there are five of us in one room and we all get sick”,

– unemployed parent from Niksic – MODA

UNICEF's response

To counter the immediate shocks from COVID-19, UNICEF financially supported government efforts to disburse one-time cash assistance of €100 to 1,200 families (benefitting 3,363 children). UNICEF also assisted the government, Red Cross and civil society organizations to address the immediate impact of the pandemic on some 33,000 vulnerable family members (23,000 children), facilitating improved child protection; education; and hygiene and infection prevention control. To address sanitation and hygiene challenges, 16,000 vulnerable children and caregivers received essential hygiene supplies (incl. dignity kits) through UNICEF's partnership with the Red Cross. An additional 2,000 vulnerable families (8,000 individuals; 4,000 children), including children with disabilities and Roma and Egyptian children and families, received essential hygiene supplies with support from Norway/Group 484. To support remote learning 800 tablets were distributed to children with disabilities and those living in the most vulnerable families and in childcare institutions.

“Kids desperately need diapers. I have a hard time coping with this situation and this help from UNICEF means a lot to me”,

– says a mother of two babies from Niksic

The challenge: The learning crisis is being exacerbated

The potential losses that may accrue in learning for today's young generation, and for the development of their human capital, are hard to fathom. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed existing problems, deepening learning gaps and increasing the risk of exclusion for the most vulnerable children. Although the shift to online education was carried out quickly and effectively, demonstrating the system's agility, children lacking access to computers, internet and parental support were left behind. Intermittent school closures affected more than 118,000 children (53,100 girls, 64,900 boys) and reliance on online lessons led to significant learning loss.

Earlier positive trends were reversed: preschool enrolment declined by 8 per cent and overall enrolment by Roma children by 18 per cent compared to the previous school year, although enrolment by children with



disabilities almost doubled. The quality of education suffered and the share of students with below-average achievement in reading could rise from 53 to 61 per cent. The education system is also failing young people, who are unable to acquire skills required for employment. Youth unemployment (15-24 years) stands at 25.1% (25.8% male, 24.2% female) and share of youth not in employment, education or training is 17.3% (18.7% male, 15.7% female).

“My kids think that we are all infected and that they will never again be able to go to school, go out and spend time with other children”, – mother, 37, Roma settlement, Podgorica

UNICEF's response

UNICEF supported the Ministry of Education to develop a quality, inclusive digital learning system, including digital content and training for over 4,500 teachers in online education, benefitting 55,000 students. Some 900 Roma students received learning support, including through paper-based materials, to ensure continuity of education and prevent drop out. School supplies and 40,000 masks were distributed to schools. Through Special Olympics, training equipment and video tutorials were provided to 240 families with children with disabilities to implement an inclusive sports programme at home. To support parents of preschool children video materials were developed with preschool teachers to stimulate development at home through play. Through the regional 'Voice for Every Child' project, tablets to enhance speech and communication skills supported 26 children with disabilities at home. Thanks to Telenor, adolescents in the 'Ljubovic' Centre for Children and Youth benefited from an IT lab to provide access to distance learning and non-formal educational programs. The UNICEF-supported Youth Innovation Lab adapted its programmes for online deployment. It also developed new activities on adolescent mental health and the #StudyBuddy programme, promoting peer learning support. Some 10,000 adolescents (65.4% girls) participated in at least one UNICEF-supported programme in 2020.

“This support comes at the right time, and my children are learning at home and trying to fulfil all their tasks. I thank you very much for that”, – a mother of four is extremely happy with the support provided to children through the distribution of education materials from the schools

“As a result of the Young Athletes programme, an improvement of over 30% has been noted in children's motor, cognitive and socio-emotional skills. We believe that this information is enough to motivate parents to continue exercising with their children at home until the crisis caused by the coronavirus passes,” – says the director of the Special Olympics in Montenegro

The challenge:

Increased risks
of violence,
exploitation
and abuse



Increased stressors and weakened protective environments due to COVID-19 increased the risk of family violence, child abuse, child labour and worsening mental health for children and parents. The UN Rapid Social Impact Assessment on COVID-19 indicated that domestic violence and gender-based violence had increased significantly. Centres for Social Work and civil society organizations reported increased occurrence and intensity of domestic violence and a reduced cross-sectoral response to gender-based violence during lockdown. Children remained largely invisible as victims and witnesses in this context. Due to the lockdown children increased their reliance on digital solutions for play, socialization and learning, highlighting the need for strengthened online protection.

“I think that’s where the violence originates from. When a wealthier guy marries a poor girl, he says I paid for this, I bought everything you’re wearing. He feels like he owns her, and that’s where violence starts from”,
– adolescent girl from Bijelo Polje

UNICEF’s response

UNICEF supported national partners to reach 29,000 children and parents with psychosocial assistance. The state-run Child Helpline was reinforced and psychosocial support was provided to 530 children. UNICEF support also enabled training of 40 Red Cross outreach workers and 175 volunteers on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse and referring survivors. The #SafeAtHome initiative, enabling children to report domestic violence, was launched by the Ministry of the Interior and NGO Human Rights Action, with UNICEF support. The Association of Youth with Disabilities, supported by UNICEF, provided psychological and legal support to 250 families with children with disabilities – assisting 817 family members.

Equipment for distance learning and psycho-social support was provided to 80 girls and boys growing up in the Children’s Home in Bijela. UNICEF partnered with Montenegro’s Ombudsperson, civil society organizations and media to raise awareness among children, families and professionals about child rights and access to justice. This helped to empower 2,800 of the most disadvantaged children and 1,000 family members through educational activities. UNICEF supported the Centre for Roma Initiatives to raise awareness about child rights and protection mechanisms; close to 400 Roma and Egyptian children took part in 30 educational workshops on violence, abuse and neglect of children and child marriage.

“The biggest benefits of this programme are that I noticed many mistakes I was making as a parent, as well as the way and the huge desire to correct them – to become a better parent and improve in what I was lacking – to be more tolerant and calm. This change of mine reflected on my children, as they became more compliant precisely because of my efforts to be calmer, more tolerant, as well as to apply everything I learned in the parenting school,”
– a parent from the Parenting for Lifelong Health programme

The challenge: Threats to child survival and health



To counter the health impact of COVID-19 urgent action was required to raise awareness on how to prevent infection, treat those infected but also ensure continuity of routine health services. Key threats to child health stem from vaccine-preventable diseases. In Montenegro, the coverage rate for the first dose of the MMR vaccine stood at 42% in 2018 (latest available data) while the pandemic is expected to have further reduced immunization coverage among children. In addition, children in Montenegro continue to face three types of poor nutrition: obesity, stunting and micronutrient deficiencies. Another challenge is posed by low (20

per cent) rates of exclusive breastfeeding. Adolescents and young people have insufficient (and stigmatized) access to mental health services, despite reporting an increased need for support. The public health crisis exposed equity gaps for safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) for poorer families, particularly in Roma communities.

“I am afraid of losing it, and I am very close to it. We have a pedagogue at school, but what we really need is a real psychologist who can help us, because we are all getting worse. No one cares about us. I want to cry”,

18-year-old boy from Bijelo Polje

UNICEF’s response

UNICEF and its partners reached over 206,000 highly vulnerable people with messages on COVID-19 prevention and access to services; over 14,000 people participated in COVID-19 risk communication and community engagement actions and about 2,400 shared concerns and asked questions about available support services; 130 parents were supported by the ‘parenting for lifelong health’ programme, Facebook Live sessions for parents reached more than 12,000 parents (24% men, 76% women). COVID-19 parenting tips were disseminated via the UNICEF website, social media and the Red Cross – reaching around 7,000 families. Targeted activities are being designed to increase trust by caregivers for life-saving vaccinations for childhood diseases.

UNICEF also provided support to the Ministry of the Interior and partners to improve the quality of support and services to migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee children and families. As a result, several hundred children received psycho-social assistance and improved primary health services. A child-friendly reception facility and mother-and-baby corner was created at the Reception Centre in Božaj, near the border with Albania.

These achievements would not have been possible without strong partners – coordination within the UN country team and international community; financial and in-kind support from international partners; and trustful cooperation with Montenegro's Government, the national and local authorities, professionals, civil society and the media.

UNICEF is also grateful for the generous support received from its institutional and corporate partners as well as individual donors to support vulnerable children and families. Now more than ever, we are counting on their continued support to our mission – ensuring that no child is left behind and all children can reach their full potential. Our particular appreciation goes to:

- The European Union Delegation in Montenegro and the European Commission which supported new partnerships on critical issues such as early child development, risk communication and community engagement and COVID-19 response.
- The Governments of Denmark and Norway which provided vital support for humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable and the British Government who supported risk communication, as well as continued regional partnerships with Austria on maternal/child health and Norway on justice for children.
- Government ministries, national and local authorities and civil society organizations, including the Red Cross, the Association of Youth with Disabilities, Centre for Roma Initiatives, Special Olympics, Pedagogical Centre, Young Roma – with whom UNICEF worked closely throughout the year to address immediate needs as well as to promote resilience and system strengthening.



- Private-sector partners such as ING, TUI and Telenor who contributed to skills-building, empowerment and digital literacy for vulnerable adolescents and youth in a year that proved particularly challenging for them.
- International partners, national authorities and many other civil society partners with whom UNICEF engaged throughout the year to identify the most pressing needs of children and families and mobilize action to address challenges.
- And finally, the UN country team which ensured integrated support to the government's COVID-19 response – through a UN COVID-19 Task Force where UNICEF led engagement on risk communication and community engagement and co-led on the socio-economic response.

UNICEF is grateful to its partners and for the generous support received.

