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# UNICEF's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia

May 2020

## Overview

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is of a scale most people alive today have never seen. The outbreak is claiming lives and livelihoods as families struggle to stay afloat.

Communities are rising to the challenge – from health workers risking their lives to fight the virus, to young people deploying innovative ways to share public health messages. Yet, even as the spread of the virus slows, its social toll will come fast and hard – often at the expense of the most vulnerable children.

This pandemic is exacerbating poverty, inequality and vulnerability experienced by many families and children. Families from the poorest households are reliant on public services – such as healthcare, education, transportation and social care services. So decreased access can have devastating consequences. The unavailability of health services, such as routine vaccinations, can have dire results. Families that rely on public transport can face challenges in getting to their place of employment or accessing essential goods. School closures negatively impact learning, but for families relying on school meals these closures can have a direct bearing on food security and poverty. As schools close and family members fall ill, women are the ones bearing the brunt of the additional care responsibilities.

*Without urgent action, this health crisis risks becoming a child-rights crisis.* Disruptions to society have a heavy impact on children: on their safety, their well-being, their future. Only by working together can we keep girls and boys – including children living with disabilities, children living in institutions, in Roma settlements, those living in poverty, and those who have been uprooted by conflict – healthy, safe and learning.

To respond to the urgent needs of children and families, UNICEF Serbia is re-prioritizing its internal resources and building partnerships to support children and their communities in Serbia.

### UNICEF is:

1. **Helping to slow the spread of the virus, especially in the most vulnerable communities, by providing public information on COVID-19 prevention measures**

2. **Ensuring the continuity of maternal and child health, education and child protection services for children and their families**
3. **Providing hygiene items, personal protection equipment (PPE), ventilators and other medical supplies**
4. **Working to address the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and long-term recovery**

## Risk Communication

As COVID-19 has spread, so has misinformation. UNICEF is working with the UN system, health experts and partners to promote facts over fear, and to bring trustworthy guidance to parents, caregivers and educators.

**SAR TE MARENPE KONTRA KORONA VIRUSO?**

Korona viruso buhljarelpesigo thaj ande varesave katora lumnjače anel nasvalipe savo šaj te avel gudlo jal pharo. Gajda, silen varesave jekhutne pasurja save šaj čeren te aven majarakhadine!

Te hasan jal apčilisaren, učaren o muj thaj o nakh androne kotoreja katar o kuj.

E vasta thoven butivar, 20 sekundurja, kandaven sapuj thaj paj.

Inčarentumen po duripe katar kola saje hasan thaj apčilisaren.

Te džan pe pijaca, na azbaven žigenije thaj o than ande savo bešen.

Te situmen vučo tatipe, hasan jal phare dihisaren akharen

**COVID-19 kontakt maškaripe po 19 819**

USAID  
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Црвени крст Србије  
Red Cross of Serbia

unicef  
za svako dete

That's why UNICEF is developing and distributing vital public health messaging and advice to help slow the transmission of the virus and minimize mortality. The messages target families with children and young people with advice about COVID-19 prevention; psychosocial support for children, young people and parents; and mental health support information. The materials and information are available on UNICEF Serbia's landing page dedicated to COVID-19: <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/coronavirus-covid-19>

- Nearly **7,000,000** people reached with COVID-19 messaging through UNICEF's social media and website
- **1,200,000** people reached daily with messaging for parents through a UNICEF segment on Radio Television of Serbia
- Nearly **500,000** people reached through the #LearningAtHome social media campaign
- Nearly **7,000** people in Roma settlements and **4,400** foster families reached with posters & leaflets with COVID-19 messaging

## Early Childhood Development and Health

As COVID-19 burdens the health system, UNICEF is working to ensure the continuity of life-saving maternal, newborn and child health services. This means continuing to meet the urgent needs posed by COVID-19, while carrying forward critical health interventions that ensure children survive and thrive.

UNICEF is supporting the health system to ensure that maternal and child health services provide continuity of care for families and children, especially those most vulnerable. We are working to ensure unhindered access to obstetric, neonatal and preventive paediatric care, immunization, home visiting nurses, and early childhood intervention services.

Early childhood interventions teams in 7 locations are continuously providing online support to families with children with disabilities and are maintaining ongoing team activities, learning and supervision.

In partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Association of Roma Health Mediators, UNICEF supported Roma Health Mediators to intensify their contacts with families, reaching nearly **3,400** people, through proactive phone calls and by providing information about COVID-19 prevention.

The Government of Serbia has expressed interest in UNICEF's RapidPro platform, an open-source platform of applications that can help governments deliver rapid and vital real-time information and connect communities to lifesaving services, and requested its installation on government servers, with the intention of deploying it for COVID-19 related use. The platform is being set up with UNICEF's support in order to facilitate its rapid uptake. Further opportunities for use in the health and education sectors are being explored.

- Distributed **71,900** surgical gloves, **5,200** surgical aprons, **25,116** surgical gowns, **99,950** surgical masks, **1,549** coveralls, and **5,376** faceshields, and **9,000** N95 masks
- Procured **50** mechanical ventilators and **60** oxygen flowmeters
- Nearly **7,000** people living in Roma settlements reached with critical hygiene items
- Roma Health Mediators supported nearly **3,400** people

## Education

With over **1,000,000** children housebound because of preschool and school closures, UNICEF is providing advice and support to parents, caregivers and educators to support home and remote learning, and is working with partners to design innovative education solutions. UNICEF, together with the Ministry of Education, will continue to work to bridge the digital divide and keep children learning.

To ensure the continuity of education, UNICEF has supported the Ministry of Education to develop a national response plan of the preschool education system to the COVID-19 outbreak targeting preschool children and their families (including through access to relevant materials for learning through play through social media; TV and distance

learning platforms; and through weekly activity-based parenting messages and tips).

Support is being provided for the development of a monitoring system for e-learning quality and the assessment and monitoring of students' progress. This is especially important as school closures pose a real threat to a deepening inequality in learning for the most marginalized children who are already at a disadvantage. Remote and rural areas have issues with internet coverage, while the poorest households also lack internet access and cannot afford IT equipment. National minorities, especially Roma students, already struggle with the language of instruction and often lack support for learning at home. Children with disabilities face serious barriers in education due to lacking accessibility and the inability to access critical services and support which would help them to participate.

UNICEF has provided assistance to the Ministry of Education to support teachers to develop interactive materials for the national platform for online learning and has contributed to ensuring that preschool and school teachers have the digital competencies to carry out remote teaching.

With the support of the Ministry of Education, UNICEF and the Pedagogic Society of Serbia are designing a web portal with a repository of resources for psychologists and pedagogues to help teachers in preparing teaching materials for distance learning.

- Supported national education authorities to provide distance learning, thus supporting over **790,000** children
- Pedagogues supported nearly **22,000** children and over **1,600** parents
- **79** Camtasia software licences procured for recording distance learning lessons

## Child Protection

As communities are disrupted, children already at risk of violence, exploitation and abuse will find themselves even more vulnerable. UNICEF is working to prevent this pandemic from turning into a crisis of child protection.

UNICEF has prepared the COVID-19 Guidance for prevention of unnecessary separation of children from families to ensure that children affected by COVID-19 have access to adequate alternative care arrangements.

We have supported coordination, knowledge dissemination and hands-on advice to helplines for the timely provision of phone and online psychosocial support and first-aid counselling for children and their families, including in relation to protection from any kind of violence.

In partnership with the Faculty of Political Sciences, UNICEF has established an online platform for information, knowledge and good practice sharing in order to bolster the social service workforce to support continued and quality child protection service delivery.

UNICEF, in coordination with the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs and the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, supports the monitoring and coordination of child protection actors in relation to gender-based violence (GBV) and safeguarding concerns for refugee and migrant children, women and families; providing in-person and remote outreach and psychosocial support, as well as hygiene kits.



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We are coordinating with other UN agencies the activities related to support for reporting and responding in cases of high-stress home environments that can increase the likelihood of domestic violence and abuse causing further psycho-social distress to children, and to an increase in online violence.

- **4,400** foster families reached with hygiene kits
- Hygiene kits distributed to **19** residential institutions, reaching nearly **2,000** people
- Nearly **150** refugee and migrant children, parents and primary care givers provided with community-based mental health and psychosocial support

- Over **700,000** young people reached with COVID-19 messaging through social media
- The **#VolonteriNaMreži** social media campaign carried out by volunteers resulted in more than **20,000** interactions on more than 400 volunteer posts

## Adolescents and Young People

UNICEF is listening to adolescents and young people to ensure that their voices are heard, and their unique needs are understood and addressed during the immediate crisis and the long-term recovery.

We launched two U-Report chat-bots, resulting in over **7,500** users who activated and used the chat-bots through Facebook and Viber and ran a U-Report poll to better understand how adolescents and young people understand online violence and its prevention and who are their sources of support.

UNICEF has mobilized young people to engage in online volunteering through the establishment of an online peer-volunteer platform (<https://bit.ly/VolonteriNaMrezi>), enabling them to be active in 4 areas: participation in the online risk communication response; translation of educational materials to reduce language barriers in education; providing online peer support; and U-Report promotion.

## Social Protection

The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 will be felt hardest by the most vulnerable children. Many already live in poverty, and the consequences of COVID-19 response measures risk plunging them further into hardship.

As parents struggle to maintain their livelihoods and income, UNICEF is helping the Government scale up social protection measures – programmes and policies that connect families to life-saving services.

The COVID-19 epidemic has exacerbating the vulnerability of people living in precarious circumstances. That is why UNICEF will prioritize those most in need - **500 single-parent families and families with a large number of children** that have been found ineligible to receive financial social assistance in the past 3 months.



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In order to advocate on the socio-economic situation of children and families, UNICEF has launched a phone-based survey among **1,800** families to assess the social impact of COVID-19 on access to social services. **The survey results will be available by the end of May** and will contribute to the UN Country Team (UNCT) joint assessment and help the Government of Serbia shape some socio-economic measures envisaged for families with children.

### Partnerships

UNICEF is working with the Government of the Republic of Serbia, WHO, other UN agencies, the Red Cross of Serbia, and NGO partners, focusing on vulnerable children, adolescents and families with children – those living in poor households, Roma settlements, refugee and migrant centres, residential institutions and foster families.

UNICEF co-leads with WHO the UNCT Pillar on Risk Communication and Community Engagement and

the UNCT pillar on the Improvement of Infection, Prevention and Control Capacity of the Healthcare; and participates in the UNCT Task Team on the immediate socio-economic response (co-chaired by UNDP/ILO) positioning on social protection.

UNICEF is working with the generous support of institutional, corporate and individual donors to support children and families affected by COVID-19, and now more than ever, we count on them to continue supporting our mission – despite these difficult times.

- UNICEF has mobilized nearly **US\$ 1,200,000** from the private sector and individuals
- USAID is supporting UNICEF with **US\$ 500,000**

