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

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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 have risen 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. Children are less likely to get sick from the virus, but we must act now so they do not become the hidden victims, bearing the brunt of the long-term impacts of this crisis. The costs of the pandemic for children are immediate and, if unaddressed, may persist throughout their lives.

By working together, we can ensure COVID-19 does not threaten social and economic development for a long time to come and help make families and communities more resilient. This starts with resisting the temptation to deprioritize investment in our future.

In fact, we must do the opposite – taking this opportunity to build back better and greener; investments in education, child protection, health and nutrition, and water and sanitation will reduce the damage caused by COVID-19 and avoid future crises. And we must listen to children and young people, working alongside them to design a better future.

The pandemic and its aftershocks pose an enormous, but not insurmountable challenge. Together with our partners, we have the tools and the experience to fight this. We are doing this right now; working with the government, the private sector, frontline workers, the public, and children and young people themselves to identify and implement innovative solutions.

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.

Zaštite sebe i svoju porodicu od korona virusa

Perite ruke redovno sapunom i vodom.

Pokrijte usta i nos kada kijate ili kašljete.

Izbegavajte blizak kontakt sa osobama koje imaju simptome prehlade ili gripa.

Ako imate temperaturu, kašalj i otežano disanje, obratite se lekaru.

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That's why UNICEF has developed and distributed vital public health messaging and advice to help slow the transmission of the virus and minimize mortality. The messages targeted 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>

- **1,200,000** people reached daily with messaging for parents through a UNICEF segment on Radio Television of Serbia
- Nearly **660,000** people reached through the **#LearningAtHome** social media campaign
- Over **16,000** people in Roma settlements, nearly **4,400** foster families and **2,900** children, parents and pregnant women in refugee and migrant centres 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 nurse services, and early childhood intervention.

In order to overcome the lack of intensive home visits during COVID-19, UNICEF, in partnership with the Working Group of the Ministry of Health for the Improvement of the Patronage Service and selected primary health centres, is supporting the patronage service to develop quality ways of communicating with families via video or phone calls. Early childhood interventions teams in 5 locations are continuously providing online or phone support to families with children with disabilities. Early intervention teams through digital forms of learning continue to improve their knowledge and skills in order to provide quality support to families.

In order to reach the poorest families, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Association of Health Mediators, UNICEF is supporting Health Mediators to intensify their contacts with families living in Roma settlements, reaching over **16,000** families, through proactive phone calls, support in using health services in changed circumstances and by providing information about COVID-19 prevention. Over **600** people were referred to COVID clinics and **1,200** children were supported to get vaccines.

The Government of Serbia has expressed interest in UNICEF's RapidPro platform, an open-source platform of applications that can help provide and deliver rapid and vital real-time information from different users 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.

- Procured **71,900** surgical gloves, **5,200** surgical aprons, **25,116** surgical gowns, **99,950** surgical masks, **1,549** coveralls, and **5,376** face shields, and **9,000** N95 masks
- Procured **50** ventilators and **61** oxygen flowmeters
- Over **16,000** people living in Roma settlements reached with critical hygiene items
- Health Mediators supported over **16,000** families in Roma settlements
- Procured **3,200** Family boxes for learning and play for vulnerable families

Education

With over **1,000,000** children housebound because of preschool and school closures due to the pandemic, 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 by supporting the welfare of families with preschool children (including through psychosocial support to parents and children, support for learning through play for children and parents, by building a learning community for children, educators and parents, by opening channels of communication with parents at the national level through the national broadcaster RTS and through access to materials for parents on social media, such as weekly messages and suggestions for parents on activities they can do with their children). Teachers reached **142,022** children (which is **79%** of children enrolled in preschool) with different forms of communication.

Support is being provided to the Ministry of Education to monitor the participation and learning process of students from vulnerable groups during the period of remote learning. 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



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disadvantage. Monitoring results show that the largest number of students in the Republic of Serbia (**99%**) are involved in some form of remote learning (watching TV lessons, using online learning platforms, downloading printed materials). The number of pupils from vulnerable groups accessing remote learning is lower - **83%** of Roma students who need additional support in primary education are accessing remote learning, of which **27%** are accessing alternative forms of support, such as downloading printed learning materials.

UNICEF has provided assistance to the Ministry of Education to support teachers to develop materials which were broadcast on TV and 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.

Through the cooperation of UNICEF and the Institute for the Advancement of Education, two national trainings - for the implementation of the new curriculum and for raising the digital competencies of teachers - have been enriched with content that strengthen teacher competencies needed for remote teaching and learning. **13,500** primary and secondary school teachers attended these trainings. A digital support service for the planning and implementation of teaching and learning using ICT has been established on the new National Education Portal (<https://www.portal.edu.rs/podrska/>). Support is provided by 15 digital mentors.

UNICEF, in cooperation with the Pedagogical Society of Serbia, the Society of Psychologists of Serbia, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, the Institute for the Advancement of Education, has organized 11 webinars for **799** pedagogues and psychologists through the newly established *Association of Learners and Psychologists* platform (<https://www.portal.edu.rs/pedagozi-i-psiholozi/>). This web platform also contains resources for professional associates in order to provide support to teachers, students, parents and guardians in the most efficient way. In cooperation with the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation online trainings were organized for **126** teachers and professional associates on formative grading in the digital environment, as well as two webinars (with the support of the Teachers' Association of Serbia) on the same topic for **388** teachers working with **10,000** students in schools.

- Supported national education authorities to provide distance learning, thus supporting over **943,000** children
- **799** pedagogues and psychologists supported **56,000** children and **4,200** parents
- **13,500** teachers attended national trainings to strengthen their remote learning competencies
- **79** Camtasia software licences procured for recording distance learning lessons

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.

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.

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 coordination with the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs, and in partnership with the NGO GRIG, UNICEF is also implementing a programme that provides a space for the creative expression of children in residential care through different online platforms and through the provision of remote psychosocial support for children in residential institutions in order to reduce stress.

In partnership with the Faculty of Political Sciences, UNICEF has established an online platform for information, knowledge and good practice sharing

- Nearly **4,400** foster families reached with hygiene kits
- Hygiene kits distributed to **19** residential institutions and **4** refugee and migrant centres reaching nearly **2,300** people
- Nearly **180** refugee and migrant children, parents and primary care givers provided with community-based mental health and psychosocial support



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Adolescent and Youth Development

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 2 U-Report chat bots about corona virus protection measures via Facebook and Viber, so that young people can get verified information tailored to them and can easily ask questions about prevention measures.

Through 5 U-Report surveys on the impact of the pandemic on young people, we are able to quickly and effectively understand whether adolescents and young people can protect themselves from online violence, who their sources of support are, what were their experiences with distance learning, how the pandemic has affected their society, family, or access to health services.

UNICEF, in partnership with the Young Researchers of Serbia and with the support of USAID and the Ministry of Youth and Sport, has called on young people to become online volunteers through the establishment of an online platform (<https://bit.ly/VolonteriNaMrezi>), supported by the Ministry of Youth and Sports. This initiative enables young people to be active in several areas: participation in communication on COVID-19 and other key topics; 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. Young people are also encouraged to share their experiences through the Youth Voice Initiative, which aims to provide more space for the content they create and to make the active role of young people more visible in society.

- Two U-Report chat bots, about COVID-19, were launched resulting in over **7,500** activations, while the poll about the effects of the pandemic was activated more than **5,130** times.
- Over **820,000** young people reached with COVID-19 messaging through social media
- The **#VolonteriNaMrezi** social media campaign carried out by volunteers resulted in more than **53,000** interactions on more than 700 volunteer posts
- More than **600** volunteers are providing online support and have invested over **7,650** volunteer hours since the beginning of the initiative

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.

In order to advocate on the socio-economic situation of children and families, UNICEF has completed a phone-based survey among **1,800** families to assess the social impact of COVID-19 on access to social services. **The survey results are available** 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.



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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.

The business community in Serbia demonstrated a high level of solidarity and, despite the economic slowdown, responded promptly to UNICEF's fundraising appeal. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF Serbia has raised nearly US\$ **1,200,000** to purchase ventilators and other medical equipment.

The ICT sector spearheaded the support for UNICEF, taking joint actions and donating directly to UNICEF Serbia. Nordeus and its employees acted promptly and, during the first weekend of the state of the emergency, raised funds for the purchase of medical equipment (ventilators, flowmeters) and personal protection equipment for health workers. An advocacy campaign organized by the „Digital Serbia Initiative“ and the wider IT community resulted in the immediate response of a number of companies: Symphony, Exlrt, Execom, Prozone, Vega IT, Orion Telekom, Typhoon Hill, Catena Media, Endava, Continental Automotive, Telegroup, Online Courses, Quantox and Schneider Electric DMS NS LLC Novi Sad.

In addition to company donations, employees from Nordeus, Symphony, Nutanix and Schneider Electric DMS NS LLC Novi Sad personally donated to UNICEF, while the managements of these companies invited their business partners in Serbia and abroad to donate. Independent actions were

also organized, such as the “I am not a robot” initiative by the Novi Sad IT society, which launched a campaign on social media to help the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina.

Telenor, UNICEF's long-term partner, joined the appeal and supported the procurement of personal protective equipment for health workers and hygiene kits for the most vulnerable families. The support of the private sector was prompt and significantly contributed to UNICEF's efficient response and the timely procurement of ventilators and other medical equipment. Other companies also donated to UNICEF, including: Multikom Group, Raiffeisen Bank, Eurobank, Vojvodjanska Bank, Sberbank Serbia, I&F McCann Group, Eko Helenik, Merck, PhiAcademy, Steel Impex, LIDL Serbia, MOL Serbia, Petite Geneve Petrovic, Serbian Recyclers Association, Kalemegdan Development, Nova communications, Inter Gradex Trade, Emakina RS, MRG, Ardagh Group, Rio Tinto.

At the very beginning of this crisis, Ana Ivanovic, UNICEF's National Ambassador, was among the first to respond and donate, along with numerous contributions from individual donors.

- UNICEF has mobilized **US\$ 1,103,469** from the private sector and individuals
- USAID is supporting UNICEF with **US\$ 1,400,000**
- UNICEF invested **US\$ 513,022** of its regular resources

