Child poverty and disparities in Ukraine

Better Learning and Skills
Enhancing education and creating opportunities for children and young people
The Situation

In Ukraine, the opportunities for learning and skills development have been disrupted repeatedly, first due to the COVID-19 pandemic and, since February 2022, the escalation of the war. Displacement, school closures, the absence of proper shelters, lack of devices and connectivity, and constant stress have led to Ukrainian children experiencing profound learning losses and significant mental health issues.

The effects are seen along the entire growth cycle of children, from early childhood to reaching adulthood. For young children, this means a lack of learning and engagement opportunities. For adolescents and youth, this means less foundation in learning and skills to enter the workforce.

The shift to distance learning, compounded by stress and trauma, has resulted in considerable losses in learning and skills. The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed a decline in the learning achievements of 15-year-olds since 2018, equating to a loss of half a year’s worth of education in natural sciences, a full year in mathematics, and two years in reading. Disaggregated data reveals much greater losses for girls and children in rural areas. The accumulation of learning losses since 2020 puts Ukraine’s human capital recovery in serious jeopardy.

Ukraine’s youth face significant challenges in skills development and labour market entry, crucial for the country’s socio-economic recovery. According to a 2023 study by the global organization International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), 18 per cent of young people aged 16-35 are not engaged in education or employment, with 22 per cent of unemployed youth citing a lack of skills and knowledge as a barrier to employment or entrepreneurship. Yet, according to a 2024 “Learning for Careers” study by the European Training Foundation (ETF) and UNICEF, 65.7 per cent of young Ukrainians inside and outside Ukraine expressed their interest to acquire skills or entering professions supporting the recovery of their country – hence the importance to strengthen systems enabling relevant skills acquisition for children and young people.

Key factors contributing to learning and skills loss:

- **School closures**: A key requirement for opening any school in Ukraine is the presence of a safe shelter. In April 2024, 90 per cent of schools were open for face-to-face and mixed learning. Most schools in eastern and southern regions near areas of active fighting remain closed.

- **Challenges with online learning**: December 2023 data from the Ministry of Education and Science indicates significant challenges in online learning accessibility. Half of children – nearly 2 million students – rely on online learning either exclusively or in mixed modality, with many facing issues such as online learning fatigue and unstable internet connections, particularly in conflict zones. Around 150,000 of children of preschool age in frontline areas are not attending early learning in-person.

- **Insufficient human resources and materials**: Teachers and other educational personnel have been displaced, especially in eastern regions. Both teachers and students experience a shortage of devices, connectivity issues, and power outages. Schools facing significant budget cuts, many have been unable to provide the teaching and learning materials needed to support children’s learning.

- **Impact on mental health**: The psychological well-being of students has deteriorated. Compared to February 2022, the number of students who feel anxious or stressed has almost doubled. An October 2023 UNICEF survey found 56 per cent of parents in eastern regions say their children are anxious or tense.

THE CASE FOR INVESTMENT

In 2023, UNICEF conducted a Case for Investment on Early Childhood Development in Ukraine which demonstrates the significant impact that investing in young children has on increased long-term wellbeing, productivity, and prosperity at a societal level. The total economic benefits of scaling up quality preschool and childcare for children between 6 months and 6 years could be as high as UAH 522 billion (or US$13+ billion) between 2023 and 2050, producing a return on investment of 5 to 1.

UNICEF also conducted a Case for Investment in Youth. Ukrainian youth bring fresh ideas and innovation critical for the country’s long-term stability and prosperity. The right investments have the potential to build a country youth want to return to and set up their lives to contribute to the country. For every 1 hryvnia invested in a young person’s skills, health, employment or participation opportunities, society receives 2.5 hryvnias in return by 2030, with returns increasing further over time. Targeted youth investments align with the European Youth Strategy and could potentially expedite the European Union (EU) accession process while contributing to economic growth through access to EU funds and programs.
The vision

UNICEF strives to mitigate children's learning losses, (re)establish expected grade-level knowledge and skills, provide integrated mental health and psychosocial support ensuring continuity of learning and skills development for all Ukrainian children through multiple learning pathways.

The emergency response supports education for war-affected children by rehabilitating infrastructure, enhancing digital systems, and providing mental health support, focusing on the most vulnerable. Early recovery interventions align with the EU Accession Agenda and the New Ukrainian School Reform to enhance the education sector’s resilience. These include supporting early learning, building educators’ capacity in digital, distance learning and structured pedagogy, and developing strategies to broaden educational access.

UNICEF aims to create a safe, favourable environment for young people to acquire labour market skills through schools and holistic, community-based interventions that engage multiple stakeholders, including youth as a human capital investment. At national, regional, and local levels, UNICEF advocates and provides technical support, promoting a decentralization agenda, focusing on vulnerable locations, including rural and frontline areas.

As a leader in improving educational outcomes, UNICEF supports the Ministry of Education and Science to foster sector collaboration, ensure evidence-informed policies, and maximize resources to fulfill the Government’s School Reform and its vision for recovery.

UNICEF’s Programme Priorities

FOSTERING PARTNERSHIPS, COORDINATION AND SUPPORT TO THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE AT NATIONAL AND SUBNATIONAL LEVEL

• Provide policy advice and support coordination efforts, including as the co-chair of the Education Sector Coordination Group.

• Support the Education Cluster and Education Sector Working group to mobilize a coalition of partners to accelerate and scale up learning and support programmes for children to ensure that all children, especially the most vulnerable, including girls, children in rural areas and close to the frontline, overcome the learning loss and have improved learning outcomes.

PROMOTING CONDUCIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

UNICEF enhances schools and other learning environments, as venues for children’s learning and skills development through various interventions aimed at improving educational quality.

• Support children, adolescents, teachers, and educators with school- and community-based MHPSS initiatives.

• Supply teaching and learning materials to schools lacking essential resources, aiming to enhance the learning environment for children, including notebooks, teaching manuals, digital devices, and school feeding programs.

• Conduct rehabilitation, such as window replacements and shelter improvements in schools and kindergartens, enabling educational facilities to facilitate face-to-face learning.

• Leverage support for the Safe Schools initiative, including provision of transportation to increase access of children living with disabilities and those living in rural and frontline areas to learning opportunities in safe conditions.

In 2024, UNICEF aims to reach 625,000 children with learning recovery interventions, 500,000 children and caregivers with school- and community-based mental health and psychosocial support, and over 375,000 youth with skills development opportunities, focusing on girls, children and youth in frontline, eastern and southern municipalities, and rural areas.

ENHANCING ACCESS TO DIGITAL/DISTANCE LEARNING

Despite a decrease in online-only learners (from 44 per cent in September 2022 to 24 per cent in December 2023) many children continue to engage in online or blended learning formats, requiring investment initiatives to promote and develop digital learning.

• Equip vulnerable and displaced children with digital devices through a digital library mechanism that schools monitor and maintain.

• Train teachers in learning assessments to support learning recovery.

• Strengthen the national learning platform “All Ukrainian Schools Online” and develop digital lessons and textbooks for the platform.

• Offer offline digital learning support materials to students in frontline areas with limited access to online learning.

• Establish student learning support centres within school shelters for children without device access, providing remedial and social-emotional learning support to children.

FACILITATING REMEDIAL LEARNING

Collaborating with the Ministry of Education and Science, UNICEF supports national strategies for remedial and catch-up learning interventions to bridge learning gaps.

• Train teachers to perform classroom diagnostics, identify learning gaps, and develop tailored learning plans.

• Support teachers with structured pedagogy - a package that includes structured lesson plans, learning materials with integrated MHPSS content and ongoing teacher support; as well as targeting teaching instruction by learning level, not grade (in or out of school).
- Offer tutorials in key subjects such as mathematics, Ukrainian, and science using both online and face-to-face modalities.
- Extend informal education through alternative platforms such as youth centres and extracurricular institutions, reaching children with remedial and catch-up learning opportunities.

**EXPANDING EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMMES**

UNICEF aims to increase preschool access supporting both formal and informal early education.

- Develop a national Early Childhood Education policy and Early Learning Development standards to integrate these critical sectors within the New Ukrainian School Reform.
- Empower parents through specifically designed sessions by teachers and communication activities to support their children’s early learning at home.
- Provide multiple alternative preschool services to ensure early learning opportunities for disadvantaged and vulnerable children without access to formal kindergartens.
- Enhance the quality of existing kindergartens, by rehabilitating and refurbishing the learning spaces, providing equipment and learning materials to increase access for young children to learning.
- Train preschool teachers to deliver mixed modality learning (online and in-person) and provide MHPSS.

**BROADENING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT**

- UNICEF aims to integrate children, including adolescents and young people, into civic engagement initiatives through formal and informal education.
- Support local hromada authorities to sustainably provide engagement and learning opportunities for young people.
- Offer continuous learning and life skills education at schools, learning centres, youth centres and youth spaces.
- Design community-based youth centres and spaces that combine infrastructure (equipment, renovation) and programming (non-formal learning, skills enhancement, access to first jobs, career guidance).

**SUPPORTING THE SKILLS-TO-WORK TRANSITION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

UNICEF facilitates the integration of young graduates into the workforce with targeted initiatives.

- Connect young graduates from Vocational Education & Training institutions with the Career Start programme under the Ukrainian Youth Foundation (under the Ministry of Youth and Sports) for skill-building, career guidance, counselling, and paid internships.
- Engage with youth centres, youth councils, youth civil society organisations in the implementation of the Ukrainian Youth Foundation interventions to further sustain and expand young people’s participation and space for social accountability at the local level.
- Support the implementation of policy recommendations on career guidance and counselling on the platform of youth centers through pilot interventions to help young individuals identify interests and define learning/career paths.
- Integrate Human-Centred Design/UPSHIFT methodologies into curricular and extracurricular activities to promote Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education.
STORY

In Kharkiv, a school is hosting a Digital Learning Centre, offering a catch-up classes. Twelve-year-old Alisa and her peers have found a renewed sense of learning.

Alisa shares, “I really like these classes. Each time, I am fascinated and learn something new that was not explained to me well during online schooling.”

These sessions significantly address both academic gaps and social isolation, enabling students to not only catch up on lost schooling in critical subjects such as mathematics and the Ukrainian language but also rebuild the essential social interactions that were diminished during online learning periods. The positive atmosphere and the hands-on approach in these classes are pivotal in restoring students’ confidence and emotional well-being amidst the ongoing war.

Why UNICEF?

LEADERSHIP IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR.

As co-chair of the Education Coordination Group and the Education Cluster, UNICEF leads coordination efforts and provides technical assistance to the Ministry of Education and Science, leveraging its global expertise in emergencies and the humanitarian-development nexus. UNICEF has also subnational presence and an ability to work with local partners, mobilize a coalition of partners to ensure scaled coverage for children, reaching the most vulnerable and hard to reach children, including children with disabilities, children in rural areas, girls, and children on the move.

ALIGNMENT WITH GOVERNMENT-LED PRIORITIES.

UNICEF’s initiatives in learning and skills development align with the priorities of the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Strong relationships with these government actors at national and local levels enable UNICEF to engage in policy dialogue, advocacy, and collaborative education interventions.

CAPACITY FOR INTEGRATED PROGRAMMES AND NATIONAL COVERAGE.

In 2023, UNICEF reached 1.3 million children through formal and non-formal education programmes across Ukraine. Its technical capacity enables the integration of mental health and psychosocial support within school- and community-based programmes, ensuring the continuity of education during the war.

EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMMING.

UNICEF utilizes a variety of data sources to offer evidence-based recommendations for policy and programmatic interventions in the education sector, including the Education Management Information System and U-Report, a tool effective in gathering feedback and opinions from young people on various topics.

STRONG CONNECTIONS WITH THE TEACHING COMMUNITY.

With extensive experience in local education initiatives and longstanding partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations, UNICEF is well-positioned to engage and support the teaching community. By fostering these relationships, UNICEF creates a supportive environment for teachers to thrive as agents of change and promote child rights and inclusive education within their communities.

PARTICIPATION IN THE GLOBAL EDUCATION CLUSTER (GEC).

As a member of the GEC, UNICEF coordinates its activities with other international efforts by developing guidance, building evidence, strengthening capacities, and advocating for the continued prioritization of education to address the needs of crisis-affected children and youth.