

unicef  | for every child



KOSOVO Annual
Report 2023

Background

In 2023, UNICEF continued working with our partners in Kosovo¹ to ensure that every young child has access to quality **health services** and nurturing care, that all children have access to **quality learning** from pre-primary to secondary education, that all children – but particularly the most vulnerable – **are protected from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation**, and that adolescents and young people acquire the right skills for **active participation in work and life**.

Kosovo's recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has been affected by the war in Ukraine, which increased the cost of living and energy prices. **Kosovo also experienced the worst floods in several decades in early 2023**, affecting around 22,000 people nationwide. **Climate change and environmental degradation, including air pollution, are making disasters like this more frequent** in Kosovo, and continuing to affect children's health and well-being.

Neonatal, infant, and child mortality rates in Kosovo are triple the European Union average, and remain the highest in the region – with a child mortality rate of 16 per 1,000 according to Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data and nearly twice as high for Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities (27 children per 1,000). Childhood



¹ All references to Kosovo shall be understood in the context of UNSCR 1244 (1999).

immunization coverage has started recovering after setbacks during COVID-19, but **vaccination coverage among marginalized groups** remains a concern.

Improving the quality of education and aligning it with labour market needs remains a key challenge. Public spending on education was 4.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020. Kosovo fell almost to the bottom of the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test results, **ranking 76th of 80 participating countries for reading, 77th for science and 74th for mathematics.**

Nearly one-third (33.7%) of those aged 15 to 24 years in Kosovo are not in education, employment or training (NEET). This figure is 34.9% for young females, compared with 32.7% for young males. The gender gap in labor force participation in Kosovo is significantly higher than in neighboring countries and among European Union members, with only 17.1 per cent of women employed, compared to 50.8 per cent of men, according to 2022 data.

Young people struggle to successfully navigate the transition from school to work due to issues with **the quality, relevance and inclusiveness of the education system**, and mismatch between young people's expectations and existing needs in the market.





Children with disabilities lack proper access to education as well as other services. More financial support is needed to scale up educational as well as social and health services for children with disabilities.

Despite overall improvements in budgetary allocations for health, education, and social protection, their proportion of GDP invested in the social sectors is still relatively small. For example, Kosovo spends 2.7 per cent of GDP on health, half the 5.4 per cent of GDP average of other Western Balkan countries; similarly, spending on social assistance, at only 0.54 per cent of GDP, is much lower than the 1.9 per cent of GDP Western Balkans average. **Legal changes are still needed to ensure specific and sustainable funding for social services at local level.**

The **persistent scarcity of available administrative data**, and the weakness of administrative data systems across sectors, **further complicates provision of updated and disaggregated information on the situation of children in Kosovo, including data on child poverty.**

UNICEF continued supporting Kosovo institutions and civil society in their efforts to address these important challenges facing children throughout 2023, as described in the report.

UNICEF KOSOVO Programme

In the third year of the UNICEF Kosovo Programme 2021–2025, work to advance child rights continued in three key areas:

1

Supporting the development of young children

("The first decade of life")



2

Promoting empowerment and skills development for adolescents and young people

("The second decade of life")



3

Social inclusion and child rights monitoring for the most vulnerable children across the life cycle.



UNICEF Kosovo utilized a budget of US\$7.9 million in 2023 and secured generous additional funding from the Governments of Luxembourg and Austria, and the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, to be used largely in 2024-2025. The newly pledged funds will support initiatives for early childhood development and the skills development and empowerment of adolescents and youth.

Results for Young Children

Nurturing care

In 2023, UNICEF continued to **strengthen the skills of healthcare providers and other frontline professionals** to provide critical services for pregnant mothers and young children. With the Ministry of Health more communities, such as children and parents, were reached with health and immunization services.

The UNICEF-supported **Home Visiting programme for pregnant women and new parents**, working across all 38 municipalities, continued to expand, reaching over 14 per cent more children than in 2022, and was, for the first time, able to provide **health and development support to over 80 per cent of children born in 2023**. UNICEF also continued to support the programme's focus on vulnerable groups, namely the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities.



In 2023 **10 per cent of all home visits were made to children from these communities**, though they only comprise around 2 per cent of the total population.

With UNICEF support the **first-ever Situation Analysis on Early Childhood Intervention in Kosovo was completed**, providing a guide to policy and programme development for at-risk young children in future years. Additionally, with UNICEF support the Ministry of Health adapted and endorsed **a new tool for developmental monitoring** – the International Guide for Monitoring Child Development. This first-ever standardized tool in Kosovo is an important step towards improved early identification of children at risk of disabilities and developmental delays by the health system and will be piloted in 2024.

UNICEF also continued strengthening the immunization system in Kosovo, focusing on recovering from the backsliding during the COVID-19 pandemic. With UNICEF support **25 per cent of front-line primary health-care workers, including doctors and nurses, have improved their interpersonal communication skills for immunization**. UNICEF supported the National Institute for Public Health to develop 30 municipal micro-plans on immunization, and advanced vaccination of vulnerable populations – namely Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities – through a **door-to-door campaign and information sessions that identified 1,200 unvaccinated children**, of whom 495 were vaccinated.

UNICEF also supported **the introduction of PCV and rotavirus vaccines to the national immunization calendar** and, following the procurement of new cold chain equipment in 2022, worked with the Ministry of Health to improve cold chain management, vaccine supply management, and vaccine administration.

5 new cold rooms and 8 ultra-low freezers for Central Vaccine Storage were procured and installed, along with 214 vaccine refrigerators and 56 vaccine freezers to ensure vaccines are kept at the correct temperature.



Early Learning

2023 marked a significant year for progress in early childhood education (ECE) in Kosovo.

Kosovo's first Law on Early Childhood Education, supported by UNICEF, was endorsed in mid-2023. The Law provides the policy framework needed to improve the quality and coverage of care and education services for children aged 0-6. For the first time, it formalizes different forms of pre-school provision – including community-based and public-private partnerships – which will help expand access to more children, and it establishes **the first official preschool curriculum for Kosovo**. UNICEF advocacy contributed to the government allocating funding to construct 17 new preschool facilities and repurpose an additional 5 school premises; these are expected to provide **services for around 2,000 additional children** in this age group.

UNICEF also continued to work on the ground to expand early childhood education services, including working with local authorities and civil society to promote **community-based early learning centres**.

More than 600 children (47 per cent girls), including 10 per cent from Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities, received early learning and development support at 16 UNICEF-supported Centres across nine municipalities. Of these Centres, four were integrated into municipal budgets and four were newly established in 2023.

Foleja, an innovative mobile parenting application developed by UNICEF, continued to expand its reach in Kosovo and now has a user base of **15,000 parents and caregivers** (22 per cent male). The app is available in Albanian and Serbian languages and provides **critical and reliable information on health, care, parenting and education for parents of children aged 0-6.**



UNICEF/2023/S. Karahoda

Results for adolescents and youth

Inclusive Education

To improve marginalized children's educational participation and learning outcomes, **UNICEF supported eight community and school-based learning centres across Kosovo** to provide tutoring, homework assistance and recreational activities designed to enhance children's learning outcomes, socio-emotional competence, and life skills. **1,168 children from the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities received support on a daily basis in 2023**, and 449 teachers and learning centre staff in their communities were trained in inclusive education, mediation, dropout prevention, and child protection.

To address the persistent challenge of school dropouts, which disproportionately affects children and adolescents from marginalized groups, particularly at secondary level, **UNICEF helped establish and train 249 local Prevention and Response Teams against Abandonment and Non-enrolment in Education**. These teams are led by municipal authorities and focus on early identification, reporting, and multi-sectoral collaboration for case management. Additionally, **147 students (63 per cent female) were trained on dropout prevention, and 15 municipalities received assistance to draft local dropout prevention action plans**.



To lay the foundations for a Kosovo-wide inclusive education system, **UNICEF deployed 25 teacher assistants in five municipalities to support children with disabilities in the classroom.**

These, along with 243 teacher assistants deployed by MESTI, will help the government reach its target of 500 teacher assistants by 2026. **Fifteen resource classrooms, incorporating high-tech assistive technology to assist children with disabilities were introduced for the first time in Kosovo.**

Skills for Work and Life

Through its ongoing youth-led non-formal skills development programs, including UPSHIFT, PONDER and PODIUM, UNICEF and its partners **reached and engaged with 2,056 adolescents and youth (1,142 girls).** Furthermore, UNICEF supported **23 youth-led projects addressing air pollution and environmental issues,** with a primary emphasis on youth education and enhancement of green spaces to promote community well-being. The initiatives promoted diversity and inclusivity, with various/diverse groups implementing solutions tailored to different communities. These efforts aimed to engage a wide range of stakeholders and address environmental challenges comprehensively, reflecting a commitment to collective action and community involvement.

Together with other UN agencies, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports to develop **the new Kosovo Youth Strategy (2023-2032)**. The Strategy takes an innovative and cross-sectoral approach to tackle multiple challenges, **including those faced specifically by girls and young women**, in skills development and transition to the labour market, including restrictive social norms and gender-based violence, and defines policy measures and actions targeting marginalized youth in Kosovo.

In 2023, the **Kosovo Generation Unlimited (K-GenU) programme significantly expanded to 744 participating organizations**, and it is now the main platform providing internship opportunities to young people, with financial and operational backing from the Ministry of Finance, Labour, and Transfers. In 2023, **656 young people (63 per cent female) enhanced their employability through three-month paid internships, complemented by mentoring and training**.

Collaboration with the private sector and other United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), was strengthened. The fifth United Nations Youth Assembly brought 150 diverse young activists from around the Western Balkans to Pristina to work collectively on themes of **peace building; community work and volunteerism; inclusive environment; climate change and youth participation in central and local governance as well as in international organizations**. These partnerships help UNICEF to address key challenges for the holistic development of adolescents and youth in Kosovo.



Digital transformation in Education

UNICEF, working closely with the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (MESTI), has played a pivotal role in advancing Kosovo's educational landscape through the development and implementation of the **Shkollat.org/Learning Passport platform**. This platform, tailored to the unique needs of Kosovo, serves as a comprehensive digital hub for educational resources and support. **Its integration into the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan (KESP) 2022-2026 signifies a significant milestone in the digital transformation of the pre-university education system.**

One of UNICEF's key contributions has been the **provision of ongoing technical expertise to MESTI**, particularly in the absence of a dedicated ICT division, ensuring the smooth operation and maintenance of the online platform. Moreover, UNICEF has actively supported the platform's capabilities by enriching its digital content and enhancing device accessibility. Notably, UNICEF's technical support has facilitated the **development of an updated digital equipment request system**, restructured the allocation process and strengthened administrative efficiency in ICT device distribution to schools.

In addition to infrastructure development, UNICEF invested in the professional development of educators, with **68 teachers receiving specialized training in digital skills and the effective utilization of learning platforms**. This investment in human capital underscores UNICEF's commitment to equipping educators with the necessary tools and knowledge to harness technology for enhanced learning outcomes. Looking ahead, UNICEF remains committed to **further development and extensive adoption of Shkollat.org, recognizing its pivotal role in fostering digital learning initiatives across Kosovo.**

Results in social inclusion and child rights

Services for At-Risk Children

In 2023, UNICEF helped to bring about advances in the policy framework and frontline capacity for child protection and social protection and. However, **data availability, limited human resources and delays in legislative processes hindered overall progress.**

Implementation of the Law on Child Protection has progressed with the **approval of nine additional Administrative Instructions.** A training programme for implementing the Law was developed for child protection professionals and other frontline workers. UNICEF advocacy and assistance led to advances in alternative care for children without parental care, including **a 40 per cent increase in monthly payments for children in foster and kinship care, benefiting 485 children.**

The UNICEF-supported Law on Social and Family Services, passed in 2023, will broaden the scope services, establish new service models, and help ensure the right to social services for all individuals in need, irrespective of urgency or risk. A UNICEF-supported report on the Situation of Centres for Social Work helped accelerate the Law's approval and increase financing for social services, **with the Ministry of Justice distributing €5 million to licensed NGOs providing such services in 2023, an increase of 50 per cent from 2022.**

UNICEF contributed to a new training module on 16 new diversion measures for juveniles in conflict with the law. **All 120 juveniles in the Open Education Correctional Facility received training and resources for vocational courses.**

UNICEF also **enhanced the capacities of students, teachers, and school management in 30 schools** to establish violence-free environments and provided guidelines for safe internet usage.

Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

UNICEF enabled the **community-based rehabilitation of 1,541 children with disabilities (43 per cent female) and 1,412 parents (66 per cent mothers)** through in 25 municipalities. Moreover, UNICEF capacity building of 310 officials and practitioners enhanced inclusive services for children with disabilities.

Despite some progress, **challenges such as inaccessible public spaces and transport, lack of inclusive education, inadequate health and social services, and insufficient legal frameworks persist**, making life difficult for people and children with disabilities. To address this issue UNICEF also launched a **22-month campaign to promote inclusion of children living with disabilities** in September 2023, bringing together multiple stakeholders including the Kosovo institutions, the European Union Office in Kosovo, municipal authorities, and disabled persons organizations. **#UntieTheKnot**, an art installation was rolled out in three municipalities, symbolizing the multiple and intertwined challenges that children with disabilities face in their daily lives.

The campaign convened decision-makers, mayors, parents, children, and partners and **500 requests were signed asking for public policies to prioritize the rights of children and other individuals with disabilities.** This campaign will continue into 2024, and will continue to call for accessibility in public spaces, inclusive learning environments, and increased efforts to combat stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities.



UNICEF/2023/S.Karacida

Improving Financing and Coordination for Child Rights

Thirty-four municipalities established Child Rights Teams chaired by mayors, and four Child Rights Team Action Plans were approved by municipal assemblies. These plans will provide the strategic orientation, interventions, and resources **for quality and comprehensive municipal mechanisms and services that enable the protection and development of the child.**

The inter-ministerial Committee on Children's Rights, led by the Prime Minister, convened twice to discuss the status of child rights in Kosovo. Children from the most marginalized communities, including those with disabilities, were present at the meetings. They directed their needs and requests towards decision-makers, **emphasizing the importance of realizing their rights, addressing pressing issues such as climate change, improving the quality of education, and ensuring access to healthcare and educational services.**

Partnerships

The results described in the report were made possible thanks to the generous support of the following partners:



UNICEF Kosovo would also like to recognize the many Governments and other partners that contribute core and thematic funding to UNICEF globally, as these flexible resources have been instrumental in achieving our results for children.

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every right



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