

Romania

Update on the context and situation of children

Romania has a resident population of 19 million (National Institute of Statistics (NIS), 2022), out of which 3.62 million are children. Since 2015, the number of children has been decreasing due to external migration and declining birth rate. Over 47 per cent of children live in rural areas, with lower living standards and more precarious access to quality social services as compared to urban population.

Political economy

As EU member, Romania benefits from EU's normative framework and financial instruments: European Social Fund (ESF), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) are among the instruments aimed at rendering the economy and society more sustainable, resilient and better prepared to various types of shocks. EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) helps the country implement reforms and investments that are in line with the EU's priorities localized through the Romania's Recovery and Resilience Plan. The Plan addresses specific challenges of Romania with focus on sustainable growth through investments in sustainable transport, building renovation, biodiversity protection, industry decarbonization and deployment of renewables, digitalization of public administration and public services and improvement of healthcare and education sectors taking into account regional disparities.

Romania embarked on decentralization reforms more than a decade ago, however, local autonomy on service provision remains limited regarding responsibilities, and more importantly, on local finances. The authority for public service provision is delegated to sub-national institutions at the county and municipality levels with fiscal decentralization unevenly applied among the sectors. Different levels of fiscal decentralization create bottlenecks for applying integrated and cross-sectoral approaches in service provision at the local level. This leads to insufficient prioritisation of the child-related issues over the economic affairs (roads or utilities), inefficient or ineffective child-sensitive strategic planning and budgeting, with further negative impacts on equitable access to education, health care, social protection, especially in already disadvantaged, economically depressed areas as insufficient funds are available particularly for dedicated services for children.

Economy and vulnerabilities

Three in ten children in Romania (28.2 per cent, EUROSTAT, 2021) are affected by **severe material and social deprivation**. Besides, Romania has the highest rate of **children at risk of poverty or social exclusion** in the European Union (41.5 per cent) and it increased for the second consecutive year, almost doubling the EU average (23.8 per cent).

In 2022, Romania was reclassified as a high-income country (per capita income of USD 14,170 (World Bank (WB)), after a downgrade to upper-middle income country in 2021. Romania's economy performed better than expected in the first half of 2022, growing at 5.8 percent (WB). However, annual inflation rate was at 15.32 per cent (October 2022); the food prices increased by 20.58 per cent, non-food products by 14.37 per cent, and prices for services by 8.31 per cent (NSI, 2022). The highest increases compared to October 2021 were for staples such as sugar (62 per cent), edible oil (43 per cent) and gas (40 per cent) posing significant challenges for the vulnerable population.

Although the country has achieved impressive growth and prosperity over the past two decades, the shocks induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine exposed structural vulnerabilities in the economy that include persistent disparities in economic opportunities across regions and between urban and rural areas. Raising inflation in Europe and Central Asia induced the deterioration of the economic situation in many countries in the region, including in Romania. UNICEF's recent research (Innocenti, 2022) estimated 110,000 Romanian children are likely to fall into poverty if the same level of support to vulnerable households is maintained.

Romania remains less affected by the **energy crisis** compared to the neighbouring countries due to somewhat lower dependence on the Russian gas, crude oil and coal (15 per cent, 37 per cent and 12 per cent respectively, Eurostat, 2022). Nevertheless, the government took measures to minimize the risk to the economy and for households, including through capping electricity and natural gas prices for households and small businesses until end-March 2023, covering almost eight million households (<https://balkangreenenergynews.com/romania-caps-electricity-gas-prices-for-another-12-months/>). Additional measures to compensate energy prices for vulnerable population were introduced in November 2022.

Romania and the war in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine and the consequent massive influx of over 2,400,000 refugees crossing into Romania from either Ukraine or Moldova has had a major impact on Romania.

The government of Romania was among the very first to establish a high-level decision-making taskforce, coordinated by the Prime Minister. A series of normative acts were developed to legalise the status of persons fleeing from the war in Ukraine and provide them with the access to services. Most important features of the new legislation were its cross-sectoral nature that allowed different entities to work together at the subnational level and the focus on children. The Order came into force as early as mid-March 2022 (Official Gazette of Romania, no. 266, March 2022), thus leading to a more coordinated government-led effort in responding to the refugee crisis unseen in Europe since World War II. In June, the government launched the National Response Plan, developed through a consultative process with international organisations and civil society, that defined a wide range of interventions across sectors to ensure access to health care, education and housing for children, young people and vulnerable persons from Ukraine. The Plan aimed at the realisation of the refugees' socio-economic rights during their stay in Romania and fostering social cohesion with host communities.

Simultaneously, in March 2022, a regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) was developed under the leadership of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) that coordinated the efforts of 142 UN agencies, national and international non-governmental organizations, faith-based institutions, local civil societies, and academic institutions. While Romania as an EU country had existing mechanisms and strong capacities to respond, the RRP was developed to support the national architecture, including with contingency planning and preparation for rapid scale-up and complementing existing services and capacities in close collaboration with national and local authorities.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Every child survives and thrives

In 2022, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health (MoH) and National Institute of Health (NIH) to address priority mother and child health concerns, particularly access to services for refugee women and children. Despite decades-long decreasing trends, Romania registers one of the highest under-five mortality rates in the EU, with half of child deaths occurring in the neonatal period (NIS, 2021).

Besides, teenage pregnancies remain at a worrying level (15,811 registered in 2021, NIS)).

Vaccination coverage (especially measles at 86 per cent (first dose) and rubella at 86 per cent (NIS, 2021)) remains below EU targets, the influx of refugee children from Ukraine with even lower vaccination rates increasing immunization concerns, including for polio.

In response to these challenges, Romania continued the efforts to increase immunization rates, due in part to UNICEF support for demand creation for immunization. Informative campaigns in Romanian/Ukrainian on the benefits of vaccination reached large audiences: an out-of-home campaign with national coverage reached 2,644,000 people, and social media campaigns on routine and COVID-19 vaccination reached 7,850,000 people.

Besides, programmes for mothers and children to ensure their access to essential services, including refugee families from Ukraine, were prioritised. Thus, almost 95,000 refugee parents and caregivers were reached with health information and promotion services and over 16,000 refugee children and women accessed primary health care with UNICEF support.

UNICEF's technical assistance contributed to robust evidence on emergency public health financing and preventive services for children, planning for the primary healthcare workforce and out-of-hours services, antenatal care, school health, teenage mothers-related intersectoral legal framework, mental health for children and adolescents. This provides decision-makers and technical entities with a far stronger basis to plan, monitor and deliver core health services. UNICEF also developed a set of guidelines for telemedicine for primary care professionals leveraging the momentum around information management reforms to improve access to services for vulnerable families who may otherwise be out of reach. Further, thanks to UNICEF's support, an application for community health nurses was developed to streamline their work planning. Finally, the National Electronic Vaccination Registry was improved to track vaccination services.

Every child learns

In 2022, UNICEF continued to support the Government focusing on the persisting challenges in education: i) budget allocation, which was almost twice as low (3.11 per cent) as stipulated by the Education Law; ii) participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (78.2 per cent, 2021) being much lower than the EU average of 93 per cent; iii) high rate of early leavers from education and training (15.3 per cent; Eurostat, 2021); and iv) persistent school segregation in schools, especially of Roma students.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) and UNICEF joined the forces to improve financing for education through i) an analysis of the per capita financing of pre-university education; ii) updating quality inclusive education (QIE) costing to enable progressive scale-up of the UNICEF-supported flagship model, to ensure access to the services in the most disadvantaged rural or peri-urban areas; and iii) peer review of the study "Public funding for access of children in difficulty to quality education", initiated by a Coalition for Education network of NGOs.

UNICEF's technical assistance on legislation and policy resulted in the adoption of the legislation on the organization, functioning, financing and monitoring of crèches and other ECEC facilities to accelerate the integration of crèches into the national education system, with the overall aim of building an integrated, inclusive, and high-quality ECEC system. Besides, UNICEF participated in "One Voice in Education" network of NGOs and private sector organizations to influence new legal framework in education comprised of a series of norms related to the equity, funding, non-discrimination, quality and inclusiveness of education. Two more laws, a Law on preuniversity education and a Law on university education, and a National Strategy on Parenting Education passed through public consultations and are to be submitted to the Parliament for adoption. These changes combined represent important steps forward to strengthen equitable access to education.

To address the persisting issue of school segregation, UNICEF continued its technical assistance that resulted in the development and approval of funding for an EU DG REFORM Technical Support Instrument and further development of the new module of the Romanian EMIS (SIIIR) on school desegregation. Owing to UNICEF's expertise in this area, CO became a partner of choice for EC DG REFORM to implement the TSI project.

In response to the Ukraine refugee emergency, UNICEF supported the adaptation of the legal framework to accommodate students from Ukraine in the education system; coordinate stakeholders at national and county levels; school preparedness; enrolment of new students; integration of refugee children into formal and non-formal education. UNICEF supported MoE to develop an additional module on the QIE IT platform for data collection on the refugee students, which resulted in decision-makers and technical staff in the Ministry possessing more timely data for planning.

UNICEF's partnerships helped to expand options for education for refugee children and resulted in more than 5,000 children accessing Romanian schools and educational hubs. UNICEF's assistance also reinforced access to online learning by providing learning materials to almost 16,000 children staying in Romania. Further, UNICEF contributed to strengthening teachers' competencies on "teaching in difficult times" in partnership with IOM and the British Council. Special attention was given to early childhood development, through the partnership with the Step by Step Association and local authorities to establish play, learning and parenting hubs for better access to services for all children. Over 1,000 children benefitted from the hubs.

Finally, efforts around connecting adolescents to information and learning opportunities resulted in the establishment of Youth hubs, as well as organization of summer camps and many extracurricular activities – forming part and parcel of particularly refugee children feeling welcome in Romania and social cohesion being fostered.

Every child participates

Guided by the EU Child Rights Strategy and the recently developed National Strategy on the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights 2021-2027, UNICEF continued to support the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption (NAPCRA), MoE and other relevant institutions to strengthen children's participation in decision-making.

UNICEF contributed to increasing children's participation in public life and decision making by equipping children and adolescents with public speaking, advocacy, and communication skills through strengthened partnerships with the Children's Board, National Student Council (CNE), and Child Friendly Cities national and local platforms. Approximately 800 children participated in UNICEF-organized capacity-building sessions, campaigns, and events organized with the Romanian Senate, Government, and the Presidential Administration. Children and youth, including the most vulnerable, had the opportunity to be connected, engaged, and empowered through UNICEF's activities that set an important example of effective child participation. UNICEF additionally conducted an analysis of CNE's functioning, efficacy, and inclusiveness that was completed in 2022 to be used for strengthening CNE's institutional capacity. UNICEF also successfully amplified the voices of children in high-level fora dedicated to climate change. Through U-Report, engaging over 1,500 adolescents who shared priorities for the Government and Senate to take into account, and with currently engaging 12,000 children and adolescents, children across Romania shared their views which contributed to the Presidential Administration's technical report on the impact of the climate change and on their perspectives on policy measures and solutions to minimize the climate-induced risks for children. In addition, adolescents shared their concerns and solutions on climate change to the participants of UNGA 2022 and the COP27 Summit. UNICEF supported the Presidential Administration endeavours to raise awareness on climate change through the newly created Green Week which will be implemented starting with the second part of the 2022-2023 school year as part of the national educational curriculum.

Every child is protected from violence, abuse and exploitation

UNICEF Romania continued its support to the National Authority for the Protection of Child Rights and Adoption (NAPCRA) to address key priorities issues – children in state care, and concerns around child abuse, neglect and exploitation. In 2022, the number of children in the special protection system continued to decrease, reaching about 44,000 (NAPCRA, 2022), with approximately one third still living in residential care and others placed in alternative care arrangements. Almost 75,000 children are left behind by parents working abroad. There were over 80,000 registered children living with a disability, yet the real number is believed to be far higher, many children with a disability remaining invisible and out of reach of vital services, facing increased vulnerabilities and discrimination. NAPCRA reported 15,925 cases of child abuse, neglect and exploitation (2021), though the real prevalence is estimated to be far higher.

UNICEF successfully combined its technical assistance to the deinstitutionalisation reform led by NAPCRA and the refugee response to strengthen the sector. Thus, 2022 saw the breakthrough of an additional amendments of the Law on Child Rights (272), including i) increased age for prohibition of institutionalisation of children to seven years; ii) elimination of exception of prohibition of institutionalisation of children with disabilities under the age of three; iii) reduction of number of children per institutional facility to a maximum of 12.

However, with an approximate number of 4,000 children entering the childcare system yearly, more efforts need to be made for the prevention of separation of children from their families. The scale-up of the UNICEF-modelled Minimum Package of Services (MPS) through development of integrated community-based services thus remains a core priority. It envisages the delivery of integrated services in health, education and social/child protection in 2,000 rural communities, with a special focus on the

most vulnerable children and their families. The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection together with the National College for Social Workers (CNASR), Federation of NGOs active in Child Protection (FONPC) and UNICEF successfully embedded the progressive implementation of MPS in the most vulnerable rural communities into the Operational Programme for Dignity and Social Inclusion to be supported by EU funds, aiming to contribute to poverty reduction. This commitment is reflected both in the National Strategy for Child Rights and the National Action Plan for the Child Guarantee.

In another step forward for the prevention of various forms of violence against children, the separation of children from their families, reducing poverty and social exclusion, due to UNICEF advocacy, the setting up of day care centres for the most vulnerable children in marginalized communities was successfully included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, which is currently under implementation.

The war in Ukraine brought many additional challenges to the Romanian child protection system – with an estimated 700,000 Ukrainian children having crossed the border into Romania. Among these, the border police and the local child protection authorities identified and provided protection to almost 5,000 unaccompanied or separated children in 2022. This was possible due to the quick response by the Prime Minister’s office with support from many actors, among them NAPRCA and UNICEF to issue the Order of 18th March that called for cross-sectoral collaboration and immediate action for the identification and case management.

In addition, UNICEF Romania in partnership with the Maramures County Council, General Direction of Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) and ASSOC organisation managed to establish a Blue Dot at the border point in Sighetu Marmatiei – a child and family safe hub providing a range of aid and support services to the refugees, the first of its kind across the Eastern Europe region. In 2022, over 230,000 children and women had access to services provided at this and various subsequently created Blue Dots across Romania.

Together with NAPCRA, UNICEF Romania launched Primero, an open-source software helping outreach workers identify, register and refer the refugee children to specialized services as needed. Over 15,000 children received individual case management – in collaboration with partners, and more than 16,000 children and adults accessed mental health and psychosocial support. This marked an important step forward to modernise the case management and information management in the sector as a whole and brings the country closer to its ambitions around establishing a single information management system for child protection. Anti-trafficking programmes and capacities were strengthened, including through a more systemic approach encompassing prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnerships with new governmental units and NGOs. This included contributing to inter-agency coordination meetings, knowledge transfer and sharing with authorities with competences in Prevention of trafficking (National Agency Against Trafficking in Persons (ANITP)), Combating (Directorate of Investigation of Organized Crime and Terrorism in Bucharest (DIICOT) and Ministry of Justice), and Assistance (National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption (ANPDCA), and General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPCs)), NGOs of trafficking in human beings (THB) survivors, and other partners through relevant anti-trafficking prevention platforms, organization of informative sessions for vulnerable populations fleeing war in Ukraine, etc.

Inclusive social protection

UNICEF ensured a robust monitoring of the situation of children in Romania focusing on key indicators for health, education, child protection and poverty, children with disabilities, adolescents, early childhood development and vaccination. A Working Group on Data was established to review the child-related data availability and gaps and explore ways to address them, strengthen coordination, promote alignment with internationally agreed indicators and data sharing between key stakeholders. UNICEF’s technical assistance in the costing and development of the national action plan for the EU child guarantee supports the Government’s readiness to implement this key initiative. The action plan is an instrument to bring key institutions together to plan and implement priority measures for most vulnerable children. When approved, the action plan is set to offer a significantly improved access to

vital services for children in the country.

As part of the implementation of the Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI), UNICEF established and built the capacity of the national and local bodies in six localities to oversee the implementation of the initiative and local coordinating units to lead, facilitate and coordinate the development and implementation of the Action Plan. These national and local stakeholders' networks bring an added value in the CFCI implementation, which in turn marks an important step forward to foster child-friendly local governance. Children's Local Councils are in place as consultative structures nearby the elected mayors and local councils being officially recognized by the local public administration, thereby setting a visible example within the community. In December 2022, Bucharest joined the Child Friendly Cities Initiative to head the child rights promotion in Romania's capital – which is an achievement in itself as well as a trendsetting momentum for other municipalities in the country. Coverage of refugee children by social protection programmes remained a priority. Partnerships with various stakeholders and evidence generation helped build a solid ground for policy advocacy on the inclusion of refugee children into the national social protection system. UNICEF led a rapid assessment of the Government's refugee response, namely the 50/20 Programme in close partnership with IOM and UNHCR.

Through extensive inter-sectorial partnerships with both governmental and civil society actors, UNICEF successfully developed models of integrated community centres, generating knowledge on how to facilitate access to integrated specialized services in health, education and child protection.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

In 2022, the number, reach and variety of partnerships at national and subnational level in which UNICEF engaged reached a historically high level. The onset of the war in Ukraine added a rapid humanitarian response on top of the pre-existing technical assistance and advocacy. This required UNICEF to engage in various partnerships across the country to adequately address the needs and protect the rights particularly of refugee children and families who live in Romania and now represent an additional vulnerable group.

At the subnational level, UNICEF Romania was able to build on existing partnerships with the county social departments expanding the experience into the new partnerships with the county-level child protection and social assistance authorities and county councils and municipalities. As a result, by December 2022, partnership relations were formally recognised in 17 municipalities that supported the emergency response for over 40,000 refugees (about 45 percent of the total refugee population in Romania) and laid the foundation for response interventions for the refugees in border areas. Direct support offered to refugees on the ground (such as provision of information, first aid, referral and supplies for hygiene and education) were implemented by a total of 25 civil society partner organisations that thus greatly extended the reach of UNICEF's interventions.

At the national level, UNICEF Romania's engagement with the Prime Minister Office, line ministries and UN Agencies – UNHCR, WHO, WB, IOM was framed by the Governments Plan of Action as well as the inter-agency Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) – which were closely aligned. These jointly outlined the comprehensive response to support the Government's efforts to protect and assist refugees coming from Ukraine. UNICEF led and co-led the education and child protection inter-agency working groups and contributed to coordination efforts on health, water sanitation and hygiene as well as information management. This allowed for a constant exchange of information between key players and the continued coordination of support efforts.

UNICEF was the first organization in Romania to launch a fundraising appeal for Ukraine emergency, less than 24 hours from the beginning of the war. On March the 1st, a one-day fundraising campaign was implemented in partnership with a key news TV station, which contributed with pro bono airing time. As a result, 112,000 new pledge donors were acquired for emergency appeal, almost tripling the existing donor base. In total, UNICEF Romania mobilized US\$ 6.40 million from private individuals and businesses, including soft credit of US\$ 0.11 million and contributions in kind of US\$ 0.65 million.

The partnership results in 2022 included the work with six donor countries (Japan, US, Korea, Switzerland, Austria, Romania) and the close engagement with several UNICEF National Committees, which were particularly supportive during the Ukraine war (UK, Austria, Germany, France, Belgium, Denmark) and helped both with global fundraising as well as awareness raising efforts around the needs and rights of refugee children and their families.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Lessons learnt

The last year of implementation for the programme of cooperation between the Government of Romania and UNICEF 2018-22 offered a number of critical lessons learned.

Blue Dots Family Support Hubs proved to be essential child protection entry points – yet support needs go beyond. At the onset of the Ukraine refugee response in Romania focused on creating the Blue Dots at the border points – to provide refugee children and families with a safe space to get rest, receive information in the country, to decide what to do next. This proved to be an important entry point to track and trace refugees, offer direct protection – including to unaccompanied and separated children – as well as to refer those in need to other services. After an initial focus on border areas, blue dot support hubs were also established in key urban centres, such as Bucharest, Brasov, Constanta, Sibiu, to name a few. With the protraction of the crisis and the emergency of a different set of needs of refugees, including those who decided to stay in Romania, UNICEF expanded

the range of services to be able to provide services related to e.g. health, including mental health and education.

Subnational partnerships are essential to deliver services.

Another lesson learned during the humanitarian refugee response is that UNICEF Romania needs to invest in expanding local and regional partnerships. This fits both the needs of UNICEF and partners since Romania is relatively decentralized and follows the expertise UNICEF has developed through a series of models – Integrated Community Centres (ICC), Child Friendly Cities (CFC), decentralized MOUs with both municipalities and counties for the response, to mention just a few.

Approaches to education.

In Romania, similar to many neighbouring countries, the school enrolment data for Ukraine children are very low. More concerted efforts are needed to opening Romanian schools to Ukrainian and other refugee children to ensure inclusiveness and integration and to ensure their right to education.

Innovations

Partnership with the private sector for children can change the game

UNICEF fostered two new partnerships with the private sector, namely Rethink Romania, an initiative of Romanian major entrepreneurs in support of the quality of education and the National Coalition for Women Entrepreneurship, an initiative in support of reducing school dropout and teenage pregnancies. These partnerships are the first that UNICEF Romania established with large business coalitions to advocate together and mobilize resources for structural reforms in education and access to services. The entrepreneurs coming together under these initiatives proved to be able to act both as key advocates for child rights and long-term initiatives, but also as changemakers as they support different initiatives in education as well as for promoting gender equality.

Integrated Community Centres remain at the core of ensuring children’s access to integrated services

In 2022, UNICEF’s continued investments in modelling pathways to offer integrated services for children provided further key evidence around the local systems’ capacity and effectiveness to proactively address and respond to children’s needs. This included insights around the “how” models of effective and sustainable integrated community centres (ICCs) responding to multiple and various contexts (urban/rural; small/large communities) can be devised. Tools and working methodologies developed were shared nationwide in close collaboration with the local Bacau Public Health Department.

While significant new funding opportunities emerged in 2022 that promise to provide sustainable funding for ICCS (e.g. National Resilience and Recovery Programme), UNICEF’s operational expertise on ICCs was recognized by the Ministry of Health, as per national regulations issued in November 2022. The guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health via new regulations providing pathways for communities interested in developing integrated community centres to access funding. UNICEF has been requested to continue to act as a key partner for supporting the creation of new ICCs given its technical know-how and experience.

Another lesson learned was offered by the fact that, beyond the five ICCs supported by UNICEF providing access to more than 4,000 children and their parents, the centers were also able to open their doors to refugee children and their families. This work is ongoing and will offer further lessons learned and will be used to address bottlenecks and structural barriers related to access to integrated services by vulnerable children.