

Serbia

Update on the context and situation of children

Serbia entered 2022 with the calling of early parliamentary elections that were subsequently held in April. Due to delays in the finalization of election results, a new, more pluralistic Parliament was constituted in August (with women comprising 38 per cent of all MPs, and 5 out of 20 standing committees chaired by the opposition), while the Government acted in a caretaker capacity with limited powers until October 2022. The newly enlarged Government of Serbia consists of 25 ministries and 3 ministers without portfolio.

Serbia's economy has largely sustained the impact of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, spiking international energy prices and a slowing global economy. According to International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates, GDP growth is projected to slow to about 2.5 per cent in 2022 and to 2.25 per cent in 2023. The effects of new pressures like accelerating inflation, driven predominantly by higher food and energy prices, and the expected slowing growth on income and consumption are likely to substantially impact households in the country and, more so, poor families with children and other vulnerable households, potentially worsening a situation that was already far from ideal.

With the political priorities still set on economic growth and crisis management, as well as management of regional political turbulences, there is little attention being given to poverty and achieving equity for the poorest children. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for the general population in 2021 reduced to within the EU average (21.2 per cent), although inequality in Serbia remains high. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for children is 20.8 per cent. Unfortunately, public spending on social assistance continues to reduce. Public participation in the budget process remains one of the lowest in the world, and there is limited qualitative assessment and debate about the budget among stakeholders.

Public administration reform is progressing at a slow pace, and roughly half of senior manager positions are still filled on an acting basis. More efforts are needed to comply with the Law on the planning system, which requires that action plans are adopted within three months of the adoption of related strategies (e.g., Strategy on Deinstitutionalization, Strategy on Violence against Women, etc.). Allocation of adequate financial and human resources for the work of national human rights institutions, including the Ombudsman, is required. An enabling environment for developing and financing civil society organizations is not yet fully secured.

The weaknesses exposed in Serbia's energy sector last winter require brisk reforms. Restructuring the energy sector, improving production and investment planning, and strengthening financial oversight and governance in the state-owned energy enterprises is considered a key priority. The Government has put in place a rulebook on targeted support for vulnerable households. However, this still leaves them exposed to the rising cost of cheap energy sources such as firewood.

The preliminary findings of UNICEF's Survey on the Socio-Economic Impact of the Ukraine crisis on families with children implemented in November 2022 show that the effects of the Ukraine crisis are more strongly felt by households with children than the effects of COVID-19 and the financial crisis of 2008. Almost all households (93 per cent) are experiencing rising costs, income is reduced for a quarter of these households, and one fifth of households are barely making ends meet. Almost 80 per cent of households have already undertaken something in response to the crisis, such as seeking an additional job, borrowing money or postponing purchases. Almost half of the most materially deprived families are facing difficulties in securing the same level of nutrition for their children as before. They also report increased mood swings and need for psychological support for both parents and children. Only a small percentage of

those receiving some form of regular government financial support perceive it as significant.

Preliminary projections of the impact of the Ukraine crisis in Serbia indicate a likely increase in child poverty, with between 25,000 and 50,000 additional children falling into absolute poverty (i.e., monthly expenditures below US\$ 150), with those living in households depending on agriculture the most likely to be affected. Projections also indicate that the anticipated income growth in 2022 is unlikely to keep pace with the cost of living.

Despite significant efforts of the Government to preserve access and quality of maternal and child services during the COVID-19 pandemic, significant shortfalls in the coverage of preventive services are observed. In 2021, none of the obligatory vaccines (except BCG) reached 95 per cent threshold. Coverage with MMR1 remained the lowest at 74.8 per cent, with one district below 50 per cent coverage.

This year has seen a growing complexity of the situation with the displaced populations in Serbia. From February onwards there has been a steady increase of arrivals of refugees from Ukraine – so far more than 128,000 Ukrainian refugees entered Serbia, most of whom transited through the country, with an estimated 2,000 - 3,000 Ukrainians present throughout the country in December 2022. Opting to stay in private accommodation rather than in asylum/reception centres, and mostly not to register for temporary asylum, this population remains largely invisible and hard to reach. At the same time, a dramatic increase in arrivals of migrants and refugees from other countries was recorded throughout the year. Over 50,000 newcomers to governmental centres were registered only in the third quarter of the year, which is more than two times the number of people entering Serbia in the same period last year. This has resulted in the reopening of some of the previously closed reception centres and increased EU attention to the Western Balkan routes. An increasing number of migrants continue to travel unregistered. The increase in arrivals is mostly linked to single men, with increasing encounters of UASC who travel irregularly and try to ‘stay off the radar’ and cross the country in the shortest possible time.

In summary, in 2022, vulnerable groups and marginalized communities in Serbia including children are particularly impacted by the slowdown of the post-COVID-19 economic recovery and the effects of the Ukraine crisis, facing further uncertainties in the coming year.

Major contributions and drivers of results

USING THE POWER OF EVIDENCE TO DRIVE CHANGE FOR CHILDREN

A Human Capital Review of the social sectors, conducted in partnership with the World Bank, was published and launched in collaboration with the Serbian Association of Economists. It was well received by the professional, academic and expert community and is being established as a key reference document in the area of social development. Its findings were included in the Fiscal Council’s recommendations to the Government for Budget 2023.

Further evidence generation activities have focused on an evaluative assessment on innovation pathways in Serbia and secondary analyses of Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data that integrates gender analysis and covers critical knowledge gaps on a number of areas including gender, ensuring a rich knowledge basis and new insights that will be disseminated in 2023. The findings are expected to inform discussions on several important areas of child well-being.

PROGRAMMING AT-SCALE RESULTS FOR CHILDREN

Health & ECD

Entering the year 2022, Serbia and the world was still under the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Omicron outbreak. UNICEF continued its support and delivered a total of almost 800,000 COVID-19 vaccines (168,000 in 2022) through the COVAX Facility, covering around 10 percent of the population, and supported the health system by providing critical equipment and supplies, including cold-room storage for the Institute of Public Health in Nis, and significant quantities of PPE to 5 hospitals.

Addressing the low immunization rates remains a major concern for UNICEF Serbia, with 9 out of 25 districts had MMR coverage below 80 per cent, 4 below 70 per cent, and 1 below 50 per cent. Despite significant advocacy to improve data quality and community outreach both locally and nationally, the 2022 mid-year data showed no improvements compared to 2021.

Important steps to further improve the low breastfeeding rates in Serbia were made through continued efforts to strengthen data collection and analysis of key indicators. The analysis indicates significant gaps in use of evidence-based practices including low support for skin-to-skin contact in the first hour (52.5 per cent), very low breastfeeding support in the first hour after birth (45.7 per cent), and low rates of exclusive breastfeeding of infants younger than 6 months (39.2 per cent). Analysis also shows that only three out of eight Neonatal Intensive Care Units apply required family-oriented practices.

Significant progress was made to further mainstream the introduction of innovative practices that focus on playful and responsive parent–child interaction, support for gender-balanced parenting, and nurturing caregivers' well-being as part of the intersectoral efforts. In 2022, UNICEF partnered with more than 50 national actors and 85 local policymakers to enable the expansion of the playful parenting programme from 5 to 29 new municipalities, now covering one fifth of all municipalities, and expansion of the early childhood intervention services for children with developmental risks, delays and disabilities from 5 to an additional 14 locations, now covering 50 per cent of districts in Serbia.

Additional efforts are needed to create an inclusive health system for all – while capacities of Roma health mediators were strengthened through UNICEF's support to revise their competency framework, roles and responsibilities, their formal status remains unclear and thus hinders improvement of full attainment of health rights for the most-at-risk children living in substandard settlements. Similarly, the refugee and migrant community is at particular risk when it comes to mental health issues, gender-based violence, access to primary health care, and potential substance abuse among adolescents. UNICEF support further strengthened the health system through preparation of guidelines for front-line workers working with this population group.

As part of UNICEF's efforts to strengthen the intersectoral system for youth mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS), significant progress was made in 2022 with full ownership and involvement from Education, Health, Social Welfare sectors in the development of Serbia's first-ever youth-appropriate and age-friendly MHPSS minimum service package, currently being rolled out for piloting in three municipalities in line with the 2019–2026 National Programme on Mental Health Protection.

Education

The early years are of critical importance to children's emotional and social development. Efforts to ensure that every child has equal opportunities, strengthening skills and competences of parents, and working on the insufficient understanding of the importance of learning through play among parents continued and will require a societal mindset shift over the coming years.

Furthermore, focus on capacity building of preschool staff for the implementation of the new curricula framework continued, reached 85 percent of preschool professionals and 35 percent of staff in private preschools benefiting from the basic training package. Efforts to empower regional school advisors and preschool principals for effective change management was also initiated.

Inclusive societies are more likely to thrive than those with high discrimination and inequalities, and accelerated efforts to strengthen institutional, legal and policy frameworks for inclusive education (IE) in Serbia through better coordination, monitoring and advocacy at the national and local level resulted in renewed commitments towards IE at all levels. The launch at a public hearing before the National Parliament Committee for Education of the National Report on IE for 2019–2021, developed with UNICEF support, was an important step in this regard.

While the number of students with disabilities and from minority groups in mainstream schools increased in recent years, differences in teacher competences for differentiated teaching and additional support means that too many children remain in segregated schools. With UNICEF support, staff in 12 percent of all schools in Serbia increased their capacities for inclusive pedagogy, and 10 schools were designated to become resource centres for assistive technologies to better serve children with disabilities and contribute towards the overall transformation of special education institutions.

To decrease the growing digital divide among schoolchildren, UNICEF scaled up support to the education system, including through EdTech Libraries and Learning Clubs, resulting in increased support to well-being, accelerated learning and social integration of students (particularly through peer support), and 60 digital mentors provided 917 schools (12,000 teachers) across Serbia with digitalization and online/hybrid learning support.

System strengthening support to the formal education of children on the move resulted in stronger commitment to faster and unconditional enrolment of children on the move, while overall the quality of education and learning support remains a challenge. New approaches and modalities to reach children not formally enrolled in the education system were explored to support the education of children arriving from Ukraine.

Child Protection

The continued institutionalization of infants aged 0–3 (in violation of a national moratorium) and young children below the age of 6 remains a major concern, and while the overall number of children living in residential care reduced to 557 (down from 793), children with disabilities are over-represented and even increased from around 50 percent in 2005 to 71 percent in 2021.

The adoption of the strategy for de-institutionalization and the development of community-based services (2022–2026) was a positive step as was the adoption of the General Protocol on VAC, and UNICEF's support to drafting of the De-I Action Plan for 2022–2023 (adoption urgently required) ensured that child and family related measures for prevention of child/family separation and transformation of residential institutions were included. More decisive action and commitment (from government) and more comprehensive support (from partners) to ensure that every child grows up in a family (or family-like) environment is urgently needed. UNICEF already supported the development of important technical resources for timely implementation of the new policies, and a rulebook on foster care to improve the overall quality and efficiency of alternative family-based care options was adopted along with technical assistance provided to centres for foster care.

Every second girl living in a substandard settlement in Serbia continues to be married before the age of 18, and a full ban on child marriage and better protection of victims and adequate sanctioning through changes in three laws (Family Law, Criminal Code, Law on Prevention of Partner Violence)

is required.

In the area of justice for children, application of diversionary measures to avoid incarceration of juvenile offenders remains low overall. As part of UNICEF efforts to increase the application of diversionary measures and alternative sanctions, 72 percent of towns now have established local intersectoral youth offending teams that are better equipped to apply diversionary measures in the future.

Climate & Environment

Young people care about their health and the health of our planet, and they want to have a say in how the State protects the environment. In response to this, UNICEF with support of key development partners, paid particular attention to the area of air quality and environmental protection to build a dialogue between youth and the Government. With support from the Ministry of Environmental Protection, large-scale youth consultations took place in advance of the Stockholm+50 events, with their inputs integrated into the final national report; and youth were also consulted in the run-up and during the COP27 conference in Egypt.

UNICEF also accelerated its work on a child-focused programme in 15 local self-governments in central and South-Western Serbia, with a total of 135 low-cost air pollution sensor devices assembled and installed to the 45 participating schools. The aim is to increase children's awareness around air quality, learn about environmental topics through exploration and STEM activities, and encourage local participation of young persons in reviewing or developing local air quality action plans.

Social Protection and Young People

Children experience poverty differently than adults. The impact on children is more direct than on adults, as children are more vulnerable to both the immediate and long-term effects of deprivations, and they have lower capacity to improve their situation and protect their rights. In this regard, UNICEF continued to advocate for a spectrum of costed options towards increased spending for existing cash assistance programmes (Child Allowance, Financial Social Assistance) in response to the Government's expressed commitment in ensuring more targeted assistance for children living in poverty. The options proposed would increase adequacy and coverage of cash benefits that would ensure a greater proportion of children being reached or, alternatively, that the ones receiving benefits are quickly lifted out of poverty. An analytical report published by the Fiscal Council supported the options proposed by UNICEF.

An investment case for a Child Guarantee (CG) programme to align with the EU CG currently being piloted with UNICEF support in seven EU countries was developed for the Serbian context in coordination with key line ministries and will hopefully gain traction in 2023.

To address rising poverty resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and protracted crises on families, UNICEF expanded its cash benefit programme in South-Western Serbia, reaching more than 600 households, serving as a good practice example for how a shock-responsive social protection system could look in future.

The adolescent period is a crucial milestone in every person's life, and this is where critical predeterminants for their success in life and society are defined. However, in 2017, spending on youth was low, with local governments only spending 0.17 percent of their budgets on youth, and according to available data, 25 per cent of municipalities do not allocate funds for youth at all. One result is that youth participation is declining, as indicated by data from the Ministry of Youth and Sports showing that only 21 percent of youth in Serbia were engaged in an unpaid voluntary activity in 2021 (down from 40 percent).

To address this, UNICEF continued to put emphasis on supporting young people to be active members of society and in 2022 engaged almost 21,000 adolescents and young people through various participation, volunteering and skills-building programmes and strategic engagement in developing national/regional youth strategies and new legislations with particular attention to equity, gender and inclusion.

In partnership with MoLEVSA and the National Employment Service (NES), UNICEF scaled up its flagship programme ‘Promoting Youth Employability Through Internships’, reaching more than 5,000 governmental, public and private affiliates, convening and bringing closer together unemployed young people, youth umbrella organizations, the business sector and government partners. The programme was awarded as the best practice school-to-work transition programme by the Tempus foundation. In preparation for a future Youth Guarantee in Serbia, UNICEF supported the cooperation between youth associations and NES in more youth-friendly outreach models to vulnerable NEET youth to facilitate an easier transition to the labour market.

ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The high exposure of girls and boys to violent disciplining at home (as illustrated in a 2021 study) was addressed through a comprehensive advocacy, programming and communication response under the unique visuals and slogan ‘Be the hand that loves and the word that guides’, reaching more than 2.6 million people. New partners were reached, such as four of the national religious leaders. Thirty per cent of social workers already received capacity building aiming to challenge social norms and encourage behaviour change that will decrease children’s exposure to harmful disciplining practices in the future. To fully protect children from violence in the home, pending changes to the Family Law are overdue.

UNICEF calls for the re-establishment and a stronger role of the Child Rights Council as an important oversight body that guides the Government’s efforts in monitoring the realization of children’s rights in Serbia. Furthermore, action to respond to the pending recommendations from the previous Periodic Report by the Committee on the Rights of the Child is needed. The recently expressed intentions to ratify the Optional CRC Protocol (on Communications Procedure) is promising.

Advocacy efforts through the national working group for the Youth Guarantee ensured that internship as an active labour measure and proven youth outreach approaches were incorporated in the newly developed draft National Action Plan to further increase young people’s access to the labour market. Furthermore, a draft Law on Internship is pending ratification.

The first Serbian Youth MHPSS conference was held to secure commitment around this important issue, gathering representatives and policymakers from key national institutions, international partners and experts, UN agencies and the public. Intersectoral coordination and increased human and financial resources are urgently needed. In conjunction, a nationwide social media campaign ‘How are you? – really?’ around youth well-being reached almost 2 million people across Serbia, and more than 54,000 people were reached through UNICEF’s MHPSS platform www.svejeok.rs over the past year.

The attention to children and young people in Serbia’s reform agenda is insufficient, and while it was positive that the Youth Guarantee was included in the 2023–2025 Economic Reform Programme, other social aspects such as optimization of the health system and addressing child poverty are missing. Dialogue with the EU, the IMF and others is ongoing, particularly considering the increased risks to families and children due to the protracted and expanding crises facing the region.

OPERATIONAL SUPPORT TO PROGRAMME DELIVERY

The Operations section continued to ensure that efficient and effective governance principles were in place, particularly important within the challenging context. The Human Resources section enabled timely and effective engagement of a qualified workforce for programme delivery, with a number of new recruitments completed. In partnership with private, bilateral and multilateral donors, the Operations team supported the programme in negotiating, defining and monitoring the contractual requirements in line with the applicable regulations and best practices.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNITED NATIONS WORKING TOGETHER

UNICEF is an integral part of the United Nations system in Serbia, this year a great milestone in the fight against the harmful practice of child marriage was achieved as a result of the joint work with UNDP, UN Women, UNFPA, and women's CSOs when the National Council of the Roma National Minority adopted the Declaration on the Abolition of Child Marriage. The related legislations that prohibit child marriage are still pending, however.

UNICEF led a Joint SDG programme to assess and address the negative impact of protracted crises on families and older persons, through research and poverty projections to influence policy-making to prevent vulnerable population groups from falling into deeper poverty.

Through joint action with UNDP in the area of climate and environment, youth participation at the pre-Stockholm+50 consultations and the COP27 events and conference ensured that youth voices were heard.

OTHER PARTNERSHIPS

In cooperation with Israel's Agency for International Cooperation and the Embassy of Norway, UNICEF secured in-depth exchange of knowledge and skills through a study visit to Israel on the topic of youth MHPSS with a cross-sectoral delegation of 25 professionals, resulting in a joint vision, and a youth MHPSS minimum service package which is under development.

Thanks to the Government of Serbia, UNICEF globally received a donation of €1.5million to support children and families affected by the war in Ukraine.

Strategic engagement with the EU, World Bank, IMF and others continued to support the advancement of reform processes to the benefit of children.

Partnerships with 31 CSOs, 21 government partners and 1 financial service provider with a total value of US\$ 3,162,403 significantly contributed to achieving results for children across all sectors.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF BUSINESSES

UNICEF continued to collaborate closely with the business ecosystem in Serbia, aiming to engage business platforms, state regulators and policymakers, civil society and other stakeholders in child rights priorities. To address digital violence and bullying, UNICEF mobilized all mobile operators, relevant ministries, and the national contact centre and media partners to join forces and work together on building the capacities of parents, teachers and children on digital violence prevention and reporting, reaching 6 million views. Dedicated work with the regulatory body and business representatives on ethical marketing and marketing for children focused on gender stereotyping in advertising.

Two major companies (Banca Intesa and Delhaize) with a total of 16,000 employees undertook a self-assessment of their family friendly policies. The findings will be used to influence other companies to take similar steps and improve their policies.

UNICEF continued to be present at Serbia's major business events, as keynote speaker at the Kopaonik business forum, and marking the 10th anniversary of the Child Rights for Business Practice initiative at a joint event with the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, the UN Compact and other business leaders.

UNICEF mobilized USD 419,597 in cash contribution from businesses including USD 117,772 for children in Ukraine, and total gross revenue for 2022 amounts to USD 1.69 million, 31 percent less than planned.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

FOSTERING INNOVATION AND USE OF TECHNOLOGIES

In 2022, UNICEF Serbia and Deloitte conducted an in-depth evaluation of its work on innovations, which found that UNICEF plays a key role in promoting digital innovations, leveraging partnerships, and using the UNICEF brand power to secure commitment and financial resources for innovation. UNICEF's role in future innovation work will focus on three pillars: 1) act as an advisor on child rights in technological innovations; 2) convenor for the Serbian innovation ecosystem to facilitate partnerships and legitimize innovations through UNICEF brand power; and 3) act as a knowledge hub among innovators for the benefit of the most marginalized children.

The development of innovative solutions continued in 2022, and with trusted business partner VegaIt Solutions a mobile application to help deaf and hearing-impaired children to learn sign language was developed and will be launched in 2023, showcasing the strong commitment of businesses to promote inclusive and social causes and through sharing of knowledge and core assets. The Bebo parenting app achieved excellent results and was downloaded by more than 44,000 persons across Serbia, contributing to better support and reliable information around their child's health being available to parents and caregivers across Serbia.

The topic of online violence and exploitation is becoming more relevant as children spend increasing time online. UNICEF acted as a broker in prevention of digital bullying and unethical advertising by bringing together all mobile operators, celebrities and regulators to influence existing policies and practices. Jointly with the most influential media publishing house in Serbia, UNICEF reached 6 million views during a 40-day campaign at the beginning of the new school year, raising awareness among parents and teachers on digital violence prevention. UNICEF also participated at the 2022 Games.con festival, including in the panel 'Gaming and children: challenges and opportunities', to highlight some of the potential risks like sexual exploitation and abuse of children online.

The mental health and well-being of young people, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic but also more broadly due to issues such as anxiety around the future, climate change and lack of opportunities, gained wide public and political attention. As part of the innovations currently being introduced in providing minimum standards of care for young people, UNICEF and the Institute of Mental Health are testing tele-mental health services aiming to improve access to services where needed through promoting use of new technologies to serve children and adolescents, especially the most disadvantaged, suffering from poor mental health.

LESSONS LEARNED

A constant re-prioritization and reassessment of risks, opportunities and mitigation measures to ensure achievement of results for children in an unpredictable political environment continued to be challenging, requiring frequent adjustments and delays. Parliamentary, presidential and local elections in April 2022 and an extended technical government caused significant delays in the adoption of critical legislations and measures, including the Family Law, Social Welfare Law, the Law on Internships, the Action Plan to the De-institutionalization strategy, development of a new Social Welfare strategy, and more.

Sustainable and lasting change takes time, and this is important to factor into the planning of specific reform processes. In this regard, while the establishment of resource centres was an important milestone, immediate results towards the transformation of attitudes and practices in the education system will take time. Similarly, mainstreaming of innovative maternal, child health and ECD solutions requires clear prioritization of maternal, newborn and child health within the context of primary health care reforms in order to improve outcomes for children and caregivers through system-level changes. Scaling up these innovations in service delivery, such as in youth mental health or ECD/ECI services, requires financing models to be developed for evidence-based policy-making and sustainable resourcing as well as broader coalitions of partners supportive of the cause.

On a more societal and values level, recent heated debates around violence in schools illustrates the need to further strengthen the work around social and behaviour change to address social norms that are harmful to all, but particularly to boys and girls in developing stages of their lives – including behaviours and practices driven by deeply rooted social norms, patriarchal attitudes and gender stereotypes, so as to create a more tolerant, inclusive and caring society.

At the community level, working on horizontal learning and coaching mechanisms, both between professionals and children and young people, proved an effective approach to enhance the quality and ownership of new ways of collaborating. Learning clubs in school, horizontal exchange between school staff, peer support among youth in mental health programmes as well as on climate and environmental issues proved to be highly effective and should be incorporated in all future capacity-building approaches to strengthen ownership and sustainability.

In order to empower young people to become active agents of change and make their voices heard at the community level, they also require adequate knowledge about specific topics. This is evident when it comes to emerging issues such as climate and environment, inclusion, as well as mental health literacy. Young people want to make a difference, but they require the knowledge and the tools to do so effectively.

The work with the regulatory bodies and the business community to strengthen ethical marketing principles for children with particular focus on gender norms was an important milestone this year and will be continued in 2023 to secure sustainable changes.