Real-Time Assessment of UNICEF’s Ongoing Response to COVID-19 in Europe and Central Asia Round 2

UNICEF’s Education Response to COVID-19 in Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Serbia, and Turkey

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Preface

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) commissioned Oxford Policy Management (OPM) to carry out a Real-Time Assessment (RTA) of UNICEF’s ongoing response to COVID-19 in the region.

The ECARO RTA exercise proceeded in two rounds[[1]](#footnote-2). Round 1 provided a broad overview of UNICEF's response and was conducted between September 2020-May 2021, while Round 2 undertook in-depth analyses of responses in two areas: social protection and education and was conducted between August-November 2021. Additionally, Round 2 looked at leveraging social media data to help understand the public discourse around areas relevant to social protection and education during the pandemic. The findings of the social media analysis are in a separate report.

This report is part of Round 2 and represents an in-depth analysis of UNICEF's response in the area of education.

The Phase 2 RTA team comprised: Denis Nikitin (Team Leader), Maja Gerovska Mitev (Social Protection Specialist), Natasha Robinson (Education Specialist), Mike Low (Project Manager), Umer Naeem (Natural Language Processing (NLP) Specialist), Paul Jasper (Data Analytics Lead), and Alex Hurrell (Project Director).

We are very grateful to the UNICEF ECARO team – especially Saltanat Rasulova, Mirella Hernani, Malin Ljunggren Elisson, Sarah Fuller, Jutaro Sakamoto and Sheeba Harma – for their invaluable and hugely appreciated support with the assessment. We also want to thank UNICEF country office staff in Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Serbia, and Turkey for sharing information and organising the interviews.

We also want to acknowledge and thank the UNICEF staff, government representatives, implementation partners, and frontline workers who participated in this study. We appreciate the time they took to share their feedback, and we especially appreciate the important work that they carry out on an ongoing basis.

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Executive summary

Object of the evaluation and overview of the analytical approach

This report outlines the findings of a real-time assessment (RTA) of the United Nations Children’s Fund’s (UNICEF’s) ongoing education response to, and education response planning for, COVID-19 at a country level, to take stock and inform a forward-looking reflection on implementation. It focuses on four countries – Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Serbia, and Turkey – and covers the period March 2020 – October 2021.

The report limits its scope to primary and secondary education. Specifically, this report focuses on the following five aspects of response in primary and secondary education: distance and digital learning; school reopening and face-to-face learning; teacher support and training; data collection and monitoring; and system support. It evaluates these five aspects of UNICEF’s response in order to understand a) their effectiveness and relevance; b) their degree of equity and inclusion; c) their adaptability; d) their successes and challenges; and e) suggestions for improvement.

The report adopted a Theory of Change (ToC) to guide our formative analysis of UNICEF’s COVID-19 response. The assessment consisted of a documentary analysis of data sources relevant to each Country Office’s (CO’s) COVID-19 response in education, as well as 11 key informant interviews (KIIs) and group interviews. The documentary data sources included regional and country-level situation reports, response plans, programme cooperation agreements, memoranda of understanding, technical project documentation (e.g. operations manuals for continuous education solutions), assessments, evaluations, donor reports, and third-party monitoring reports. Interviewees included CO staff who were very familiar with the implementation of education programming, government counterparts who were familiar with the implementation of UNICEF’s education programming, and civil society organisation (CSO) counterparts who were familiar with the implementation of UNICEF’s education programming.

The intended audience of the report is primarily UNICEF ECARO and five UNICEF COs as well as their relevant governments, United Nations agencies, and other development partners as they reflect on and harness over the course of the response in their respective countries.

Key findings, lessons learned (challenges and success factors) and recommendations

Government partners were universally positive about the effectiveness and relevance of UNICEF’s contribution to supporting education systems during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in regard to teacher training and continuity of learning. COs’ ability to collect and analyse education data, at times within a month of the first lockdown enabled UNICEF to quickly diagnose the situation and respond with relevant interventions. Effectiveness was also enhanced through COs’ ability to draw on international best practices provided by the regional office and UNICEF Headquarters. KIIs reported adaptability as UNICEF’s greatest strength during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many COs had significant experience in responding to emergencies and this contributed to their ability to adapt, ensuring that all staff members knew what to do. UNICEF’s experience with emergency situations (e.g. the Syrian migrant crisis) led CSO partners to describe its response to COVID-19 as ‘natural’.

The large donations that UNICEF was able to mobilise during this period significantly enhanced the effectiveness of its work and was possible due to the trust placed in UNICEF and due to UNICEF’s previous record with governments and the public. Thematic funds were also made available to COs within two weeks of the school closures, which meant that UNICEF could respond before many other partners were able to do so. This proved a particular advantage when supporting ministries of education (MoEs), whose budgets were much less flexible than UNICEF’s. Large partner networks were important for adaptability, as UNICEF was able to draw on their expertise at short notice, both for programme design and delivery.

However, UNICEF’s overall effectiveness was compromised by the challenges associated with promoting equity and inclusion in the education system. The extent to which UNICEF’s work supported equity and inclusion in education during the COVID-19 pandemic is mixed. On the one hand, UNICEF’s extensive experience in working with refugee children was a significant advantage, since UNICEF had strong relationships with delivery partners who worked directly with refugees and children on the move. Furthermore, UNICEF’s rapid data collection was an essential aspect of advocating for the needs of vulnerable children, particularly Roma children. , However, KIIs with COs indicated that the methodological challenges of assessing the situation of children with disabilities meant that these children were largely ignored throughout the school closures. Only recently, as more data has been collected and as the immediate impact of COVID-19 has subsided, has programming been developed to support the education of children with disabilities. Similarly, gender parity in school enrolment prior to the pandemic was often cited as a reason why COs chose to not develop gender-responsive programming.

UNICEF had several successes in its work supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic. All COs noted that their relationship with government and other stakeholders had strengthened due to the intensity of the work, and that this further established UNICEF as an important partner in the region. Tteacher training programming towards the beginning of the pandemic occurred across different countries. Teacher training was designed to support teachers in regard to digital competencies and digital pedagogies, and was particularly successful, with many more teachers being reached than initially expected, and in a cost-effective way. The mainstreaming of psychosocial support for both teachers and families was an important success, and one which will likely have long-term impact. Lastly, UNICEF Serbia and UNICEF Turkey’s investments in digital learning prior to COVID-19 demonstrates the success of UNICEF’s ability to prepare for future educational trends.

Several challenges arose in UNICEF’s work in supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 lockdowns were a new type of emergency that UNICEF (and indeed the world) had not prepared for. UNICEF COs struggled to gauge how long the school closures were likely to last and therefore decisions were often torn between short-term needs and long-term structural solutions. The nature of the school closures meant that COs also struggled to collect data and conduct student assessments when children were not physically in school. The inability to assess how children were learning or engaging with materials meant that it was challenging for UNICEF COs to monitor and evaluate the impact of their interventions, especially since monitoring and evaluation was not a priority when the pandemic started. The lack of monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) also contributed to difficulties when engaging donors who requested evidence of impact. The absence of standards relating to digital education and pedagogy made it difficult to develop teacher training materials, or to make decisions regarding device procurement.

Several areas of improvement can be identified, based on UNICEF’s work in supporting the MoE education system during the COVID-19 pandemic. First is the need to develop methodological approaches to assessing learning and learning behaviour when children are not physically attending school. Second is the need to develop standards for digital learning for both teachers and students, in order to support teacher training and device procurement programming. Third is the need for UNICEF to consciously develop partnerships and the capacity of partners, so that a strong stakeholder network is in place and is prepared for future emergencies.

Table of contents

[Preface i](#_Toc94023526)

[Executive summary ii](#_Toc94023527)

[List of tables, figures, and boxes vii](#_Toc94023528)

[List of abbreviations viii](#_Toc94023529)

[1 Introduction 1](#_Toc94023530)

[2 Methodology 3](#_Toc94023531)

[2.1 RTA questions 3](#_Toc94023532)

[2.2 Light-touch approach 8](#_Toc94023533)

[2.3 Use of a theory of change 8](#_Toc94023534)

[2.4 Terminology related to gender 9](#_Toc94023535)

[2.5 Activities 10](#_Toc94023536)

[2.6 Limitations 11](#_Toc94023537)

[2.7 Ethical considerations 11](#_Toc94023538)

[3 Background 13](#_Toc94023539)

[3.1 Education context before COVID-19 13](#_Toc94023540)

[3.2 The pandemic’s effects on education 22](#_Toc94023541)

[3.3 Government responses to the pandemic 25](#_Toc94023542)

[4 Descriptions of UNICEF’s education response to the COVID-19 pandemic 31](#_Toc94023543)

[4.1 System-level support 36](#_Toc94023544)

[4.2 Continuity of learning 37](#_Toc94023545)

[4.3 Safe school reopening 38](#_Toc94023546)

[4.4 Teacher support 39](#_Toc94023547)

[4.5 Data collection and monitoring 40](#_Toc94023548)

[5 Assessment of UNICEF’s education response to the COVID-19 pandemic 42](#_Toc94023558)

[5.1 Effectiveness and relevance of UNICEF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic 42](#_Toc94023559)

[5.2 Adaptability of UNICEF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic 47](#_Toc94023560)

[5.3 Equity and inclusion relating to UNICEF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic 49](#_Toc94023561)

[5.4 Sector coordination 50](#_Toc94023562)

[5.5 Challenges relating to UNICEF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic 51](#_Toc94023563)

[5.6 Lessons learned from UNICEF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic 52](#_Toc94023564)

[5.7 Country-level observations 54](#_Toc94023565)

[5.8 Summary of findings 57](#_Toc94023566)

[6 Conclusions and moving forward 59](#_Toc94023567)

[6.1 Successes 60](#_Toc94023568)

[6.2 Challenges 61](#_Toc94023570)

[6.3 Recommendations for strengthening UNICEF’s education response (ECA Regional Office). 62](#_Toc94023571)

[References 64](#_Toc94023573)

[Annex A List of interviewees 66](#_Toc94023574)

[Annex B Interview schedule 67](#_Toc94023575)

[Annex C Azerbaijan country-specific assessment 77](#_Toc94023576)

[C.1 Main areas of response 77](#_Toc94023577)

[C.2 Assessment of UNICEF’s response 80](#_Toc94023578)

[Annex D Turkey country-specific assessment 85](#_Toc94023579)

[D.1 Main areas of response 85](#_Toc94023580)

[D.2 Assessment of UNICEF’s response 88](#_Toc94023581)

[Annex E Serbia country-specific assessment 93](#_Toc94023582)

[E.1 Main areas of response 93](#_Toc94023583)

[E.2 Assessment of UNICEF’s response 95](#_Toc94023584)

[Annex F BiH country-specific assessment 102](#_Toc94023585)

[F.1 Main areas of response 102](#_Toc94023586)

[F.2 Assessment of UNICEF’s response 106](#_Toc94023587)

[Annex G Self-assessment of report’s compliance with UNICEF’s quality assurance checklist criteria 109](#_Toc94023588)

[Annex H Original RTA ToR 118](#_Toc94023589)

List of tables, figures, and boxes

[Table 1: Key evaluation questions 4](#_Toc90051308)

[Table 2: Education financing in the four focus countries 15](#_Toc90051309)

[Table 3: Internet penetration in four focus countries (World Bank, 2021) 21](#_Toc90051310)

[Table 4: Summary of UNICEF COVID-19 education responses 29](#_Toc90051311)

Table 5: UNICEF Country Office achievement of education targets..………………….40

Table 6: UNICEF County Office Cash Transfers in USD………………………………..41

[Figure 1: Tentative process-centred ToC for UNICEF COs' COVID-19 response 7](#_Toc89875130)

[Figure 2: Gender continuum 9](#_Toc89875131)

Figure 3: HACT budget per 1000 of population……….…………………………………41

Figure 4: Change in HACT expenditures on education in 2018 - 2021 (HACT expenditure in 2018 is set to 100 for all countries) ……………………………42

[Box 1: Education inequalities in Turkey prior to COVID-19 16](#_Toc90046195)

[Box 2: Education enrolment levels in Serbia prior to COVID-19 16](#_Toc90046196)

[Box 3: Refugee children in the Turkish education system 20](#_Toc90046197)

[Box 4: Refugee children in the Serbian education system 20](#_Toc90046198)

List of abbreviations

BiH Bosnia and Herzegovina

CO County Office

CPD Continuing professional development

CSO Civil society organisation

EBA *Eğitim Bilişim Ağı* (Educational Informatics Network)

ECARO Europe and Central Asia Regional Office

ECD Early childhood development

ECA Europe and Central Asia

ECAR Europe and Central Asia Region

EU European Union

HACT Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfers

HPM Humanitarian Performance Monitoring

ICT Information and communication technology

IOE Institute of Education

KII Key informant interview

MoE Ministry of Education

MoESTD Ministry of Education, Science, and Technical Development

MoNE Ministry of National Education

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OPM Oxford Policy Management

PISA Programme for International Student Assessment

PPE Personal protective equipment

RNA Rapid needs assessment

RTA Real-Time Assessment

SDG Sustainable Development Goal

ToC Theory of change

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

UNEG United Nations Evaluation Group

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNICEF United Nations Children’s Fund

USAID United States Agency for International Development

# Introduction

The UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) has actively responded to the needs of children and their families arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The scale and impact of the pandemic, the fast pace with which it has unfolded, and the required speed of UNICEF’s response have challenged the usual evaluation and assessment cycle that underpins its programming and brought to the fore the need to (a) take stock of its response, and (b) establish an approach for a rapid – if not truly real-time – assessment of the response.

With this in mind, the UNICEF ECARO Evaluation Team proposed ‘*a real-time assessment (RTA) of UNICEF’s ongoing response and response planning to COVID-19 at country level to take stock and inform a forward-looking reflection on the implementation. The RTA includes an assessment of the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on basic services, the quality of the related program response, while also providing early insights on the outcomes achieved*’. To date, the RTA exercise has consisted of two rounds: RTA Round 1 and Round 2. RTA Round 1 focused on the earlier stage of the COVID-19 response from March to October–November 2020 and aimed to give a broad view of UNICEF's response to the pandemic in the Europe and Central Asia Region (ECAR) across all areas of UNICEF COs’ response. RTA Round 1 focused on six ECARO countries: Croatia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Ukraine.

RTA Round 2 aims to provide an in-depth understanding of UNICEF’s pandemic response in two areas: education and social protection. It focuses on nine ECARO countries that indicated their interest to participate in RTA Round 2 to UNICEF ECARO: Albania, Azerbaijan, BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. The choice of these two deep-dive areas – education and social protection – was informed by (a) the preferences of individual COs, expressed through a survey, and (b) the findings of the RTA Round 1 report. This choice was subsequently endorsed by the ECAR Deputy Regional Director.

This report is part of RTA Round 2 and brings together the findings from the education RTA that focused on four countries: Azerbaijan, BiH, Serbia, and Turkey. It limits its scope to primary and secondary education. Issues and programming related to early childhood education, technical and vocational training, and post-secondary education are therefore not covered. Specifically, this report focuses on the following five aspects of response in primary and secondary education: distance and digital learning; school reopening and face-to-face learning; teacher support and training; data collection and monitoring; and system support where child rights, equity and gender were key issues throughout.

The intended beneficiaries of this report are school-aged children within ECAR who currently or in the future may benefit from UNICEF’s programming and support to the education sector. In particular, the findings of this report are intended to benefit the most vulnerable children: those from low-income households, children on the move, children with disabilities, and Roma children. A focus on these children as beneficiaries reflects UNICEF’s commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which aims to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’. Given the nature of the COVID-19 crisis, which has forced the closure of many schools, SDG Target 4.1 has particular relevance: ‘By 2030 ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes’.

The intended duty bearers and the primary intended users of this report are UNICEF COs and UNICEF Regional Office in ECAR, as they take stock of their education response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and as they work to develop their response in the future.

# Methodology

This section sets out the methodology for the education RTA, describing the questions guiding the RTA, setting out the analytical approach (including the specific activities undertaken), and listing the proposed data sources, reporting and dissemination procedures, and ethical considerations for the thematic deep dives, as well as the ways of working between Oxford Policy Management (OPM) and UNICEF.

## RTA questions

The RTA answers a set of assessment questions which have been formulated with a view to capturing the relevance, adaptability and effectiveness of the education response to COVID-19, identifying work related to gender, equity, and coordination, and understanding challenges/obstacles, success factors, and lessons associated with these[[2]](#footnote-3). An initial list of questions was developed by the ECARO evaluation team and the Education Regional Adviser based on questions developed by the RTA team during Round 1. These questions were then reviewed and revised by the RTA team evaluation specialists and the final list of questions was approved by the relevant UNICEF Regional Advisers. The final list of questions (as well as analysis, evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations) reflect the issues of gender and equity as the RTA assesses the extent to which the implementation of UNICEF education response addresses the issues of child rights and Leave No-one Behind (gender and other excluded and marginalized groups). A full list of the questions can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Key evaluation questions

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Relevant RTA theme | Part 1 – UNICEF’S response to COVID-19 through learning support | | | Part 2 – UNICEF’S response to COVID-19 through sector support | | |
| **1.1 Distance and digital learning** | **1.2 School reopening and face-to-face learning** | **1.3 Teacher support and training** | **2.1 Partner coordination** | **2.2 Data collection and management** | **2.3 Advocacy** |
| National response | How, if at all, were national policies, programmes, and practices in primary and secondary education adjusted to respond to COVID-19?  What are the key issues, strengths, challenges, and gaps related to the national response to COVID-19 in primary and secondary education?  What are the challenges faced by specific vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic and to what extent did the national response address them? | | | | | |
| UNICEF’s education response | What were UNICEF’s activities in regard to distance and digital learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? | What were UNICEF’s activities in regard to school reopening and face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? | What were UNICEF’s activities in regard to teacher support and training during the COVID-19 pandemic? | In what ways did UNICEF support partner coordination during the COVID-19 pandemic? Are there any examples of UNICEF COs working with a specific United Nations agency (or agencies) in scaling impact through investing in upstream advocacy? Has the joint work resulted in any specific result? | What were UNICEF’s activities in regard to data collection and management during the COVID-19 pandemic? | What were UNICEF’s activities in regard to advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic? |
| Effectiveness of UNICEF contribution | How effective and relevant were these activities in supporting learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? | How effective and relevant were these activities in supporting learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? | How effective and relevant were these activities in supporting learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? | How effective and relevant was UNICEF’s coordination of partners in supporting the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic? How effective have system-wide coordination efforts been? | How effective and relevant were these activities in supporting the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic? | How effective and relevant were these activities in supporting the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic? |
| In what ways have these activities supported the national education system generally? | In what ways have these activities supported the national education system generally? | In what ways have these activities supported the national education system generally? | In what ways have these partnerships supported the national education system generally? | In what ways have these activities supported the national education system generally? | In what ways have these activities supported the national education system generally? |
| Equity of UNICEF engagement | To what extent did these activities support equity and inclusion along the lines of gender, disability, and other relevant characteristics?  Does the strategy for ‘continuity of learning’ also look at aspects of girls’ limited access to learning devices, limited technology awareness for learning, and the gender norms and stereotypes that cause this gender digital divide? | To what extent did these activities support equity and inclusion along the lines of gender, disability, and other relevant characteristics?  Has a gender-responsive ‘opening up schools’ strategy[[3]](#footnote-4) been put in place? | To what extent did these activities support equity and inclusion along the lines of gender, disability, and other relevant characteristics? | To what extent did these activities support equity and inclusion along the lines of gender, disability, and other relevant characteristics? | To what extent did these activities support equity and inclusion along the lines of gender, disability, and other relevant characteristics? | To what extent did these activities support equity and inclusion along the lines of gender, disability, and other relevant characteristics? |
| Relevance and adaptability of UNICEF programming | How adaptable were these activities in responding to changing educational needs during the COVID-19 pandemic? | How adaptable were these activities in responding to changing educational needs during the COVID-19 pandemic? | How adaptable were these activities in responding to changing educational needs during the COVID-19 pandemic? | How adaptable were these partnerships in responding to the changing needs of the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic? | How adaptable were these activities in responding to the changing needs of the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic? | How adaptable were these activities in responding to the changing needs of the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic? |
| Successes, challenges, and suggestions for improvement | What have been the successes and challenges, and what suggestions are there for improvement, in regard to these activities? | What have been the successes and challenges, and what suggestions are there for improvement, in regard to these activities? | What have been the successes and challenges, and what suggestions for improvement are there, in regard to these activities? | What have been the successes and challenges, and what suggestions for improvement are there, in regard to these partnerships? What lessons can be drawn for UNICEF to further leverage its comparative advantage? | What have been the successes and challenges, and what suggestions for improvement are there, in regard to these activities? | What have been the successes and challenges, and what suggestions for improvement are there, in regard to these activities? |

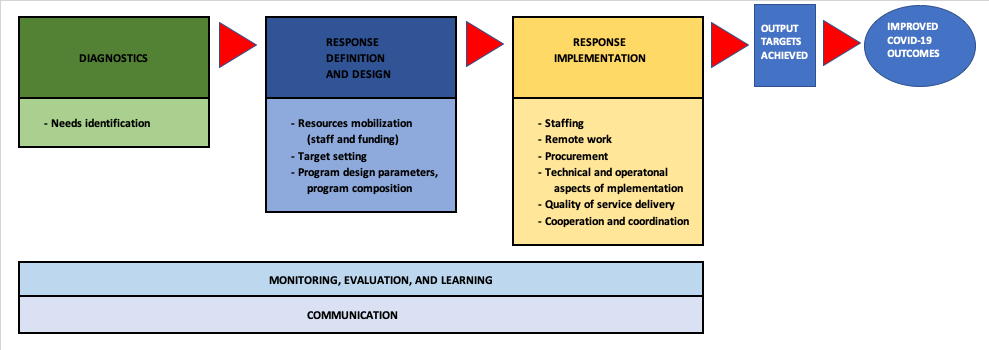
## Light-touch approach

This report aims to perform a deep dive into the education response to COVID-19 while maintaining a light touch. To accomplish this, we opted for a ‘formative’ rather than ‘summative’ assessment approach in that we aimed to generate meaningful insights and lessons learned (thus formative) rather than give an exhaustive picture of the COVID-19 response (summative). To this end, at the inception stage the RTA team identified several areas that are central to UNICEF’s COVID-19 response, which were identified in consultation with the Regional Education Adviser: (a) distance and digital learning; (b) school reopening and face-to-face learning; (c) teacher support and training; (d) partner coordination; (e) data collection and management; and (f) advocacy. Extending in-depth coverage to other areas of response for the sake of being comprehensive risked jeopardising our ability to produce in-depth analysis.

## Use of a theory of change

Round 1 of the RTA adopted a theory of change (ToC) – see Figure 1[[4]](#footnote-5) – to guide our analysis of UNICEF’s COVID-19 response. Our key RTA questions and themes tracked the five core processes in the ToC: diagnostics, response design, response implementation, MEL, and communication. In order to deliver outputs that could lead to improvement in COVID-19 outcomes, COs would need to successfully act on all five ToC components. Conversely, gaps or weaknesses in any of them would detract from the effectiveness of the COVID-19 response.

Figure 1: Tentative process-centred ToC for UNICEF COs' COVID-19 response



Source: RTA Round 1 TOR

**While we structure our analysis and presentation of the findings around the evaluation questions rather than the business processes identified in the ToC, we *implicitly* make use of the ToC.** We use the ToC as a guide in the deep-dive analysis of COVID-19 response in education since it allows us to systematically examine the COVID-19 response for potential bottlenecks, and the framing of the COVID-19 response in terms of business processes is consistent with the predominantly qualitative slant of the RTA analysis. We opted for the use of the ToC as an implicit rather than an explicit guide to our analysis so as to be consistent with a light-touch and formative approach, rather than a summative assessment. In other words, we probed all elements of the ToC through KIIs and a desk review, but focusing our analysis only on the processes and aspects of response that emerged as most salient in the KIIs for the purpose of answering our assessment questions, and that offered clear value-added in terms of learning from the COVID-19 response experience. We therefore accepted some ‘loss’ of summative rigour and comprehensiveness, but have reason to believe that this ‘loss’ affects aspects of the COVID-19 response that are of secondary or tertiary importance (based on key informants’ feedback).

Furthermore, the ToC makes it clear that we define effectiveness, relevance, and adaptability in process-oriented terms, in addition to the alignment between measures of needs, targets, inputs, outputs, and co-evolution of these metrics. In the context of crisis response, whereby few of these quantitative metrics may be available, data collection is limited, and the relevant methodologies are not well defined, so we look to complement them with qualitative data on processes. For instance, **relevance** is not only a quantitative measure that compares the nature and level of need with the nature and level of a CO’s activities, it also measures whether the CO puts in place processes that allow for registering needs. By the same token, **effectiveness** is not solely seen as a measure of change in outputs and outcomes, but also of whether well-developed and functional business processes are being put in place that, with a high degree of probability – when implemented well – would transform inputs into outputs and outputs into outcomes. **Adaptability** is not only a measure of the co-evolution of the metric of needs and the metric of inputs and outputs, it is also a measure of whether adaptive procedures are put in place: for example, are mechanisms put in place that allow for a feedback loop between needs and the nature and level of COs’ inputs? Effective communication channels, ability to raise and reallocate funds rapidly, flexible procurement procedures, and ability to deploy the necessary expertise in response to changes would therefore be indicative of adaptability.

## Terminology related to gender

In discussing UNICEF’s programming in connection with gender, we use the terminology put forward in *UNICEF Guidance on Gender Integration in Evaluations*, adapted from the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP’s) Gender Results Effectiveness Scale (see Figure 2). UNICEF strives to make its programming gender-responsive or gender-transformative (also referred to as gender-positive).

Figure 2: Gender continuum

Text

Description automatically generated

Source: UNICEF (2020c) Gender Equality, Global Annual Results Report 2019, UNICEF, New York.

## Activities

To answer the above questions, the education RTA team conducted the following activities:

(a) **Analysis of documentary data sources** relevant to each CO’s COVID-19 response in education for Azerbaijan, BiH, Turkey, and Serbia. The documentary data sources included regional and country level situation reports, response plans, programme cooperation agreements, memoranda of understanding, technical project documentation (e.g. operations manuals for continuous education solutions), assessments, evaluations, donor reports, and third-party monitoring reports. The relevant data sources were identified and provided by the ECARO evaluation team and the relevant COs during the inception stage.

(b) **Undertaking KIIs and group interviews** and conducting analysis of these interviews. Interviewees included CO staff who were very familiar with the implementation of education programming, government counterparts who were familiar with the implementation of UNICEF’s education programming, and CSO counterparts who were familiar with the implementation of UNICEF’s education programming. Including CSOs was important as representatives of direct beneficiaries since the end-users were not part of RTA. For the purposes of the evaluation the key informants are considered stakeholders in UNICEF’s education response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The relevant interviewees were identified by UNICEF programme staff within each CO, and were approached for an interview by these staff. Details of who was interviewed for each country can be found in Annex A. Eleven interviews took place in total. Interview guides can be found in Annex B. Following the first draft of the report, CO staff had the opportunity to read, comment, and make suggestions in regard to the report.

Towards the completion of the RTA analysis, a quality assurance review was conducted to ensure compliance of the report with UNICEF’s quality criteria. The results of this mapping are included in Annex G.

## Limitations

The RTA presented in this report has the following limitations:

* While ‘effectiveness’ is one of the RTA themes, the design of the RTA has not allowed for a rigorous quantitative assessment of the effectiveness of UNICEF’s COVID-19 response on development outcomes in education. However, the RTA mitigates this limitation by taking a process-focused view of effectiveness. The report provides insights into practices, processes, and factors related to programming that are likely to improve or impede UNICEF’s ability to achieve the desired outcomes, and assesses evidence of the achievement of targets. The RTA also explores stakeholders’ perspectives on the effectiveness of the COVID-19 response.
* The small sample size for the interviews within each count means that a full range of perspectives has not been captured. Although group interviews were used where appropriate to capture the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, the findings in this report represent the views of only a small number of stakeholders.
* In some instances, government stakeholders were not able to be interviewed due to time constraints. In Turkey and BiH, for example, only UNICEF COs and CSOs were able to be interviewed.
* The small sample of countries – while capturing a degree of the diversity of ECARO’s experience with and response to COVID-19 – is not fully representative of the full breadth of regional experience. Furthermore, the difference between these countries and the capacity of their COs means that the findings may not be generalisable or easily synthesised.
* The perspectives of the final beneficiaries (e.g. students, teachers, school administrators, councillors) on UNICEF’s COVID-19 response have not been captured in the RTA directly, mainly because the collection of data from these stakeholders was beyond the scope of the data exercise and UNICEF internal documentation does not include their views. We rely on secondary accounts of final beneficiaries’ experience by key informants. Given the nature of the exercise – which assesses UNICEF’s response – these secondary accounts may be partial to bias. This may skew the findings to present UNICEF’s response in a more favourable light.

## Ethical considerations

The OPM RTA team followed a set of ethical principles throughout the RTA. The RTA was considered to have low ethical risk as respondents were only interviewed in their professional area and were not asked any questions on personal matters. We also did not conduct any interviews with any end-users or with community members. Evaluators understood their obligations as including ensuring their independence, impartiality, credibility, and accountability, and addressing conflicts of interest. The RTA team was not subject to any conflicts of interest and confirmed that they were able to carry out the evaluation without any undue interference. The RTA team observed the ethical standards set out in OPM’s ethical code. It upholds safeguarding in the treatment of evaluation participants by respecting dignity, diversity, and autonomy. respect for dignity and diversity, right to self-determination, fair representation, and compliance with codes for vulnerable groups (i.e. adherence to ethical principles and procedure, do no harm, confidentiality and data collection). For the purposes of the RTA, no official ethical approval was needed to be obtained. The following core principles guided our conduct throughout.

**Clarifying purpose:** OPM researchers clearly introduced themselves to all participants and clearly explained the purposes of the interview and what would be done with the information. This ensured that the respondents had accurate information about the work and an opportunity to clarify questions.

**Informed voluntary consent:** All respondents had the full right to refuse to participate before or at any time during the interviews.

**Anonymity:** It is OPM’s responsibility to ensure that any personal data of the respondents that could identify them remain confidential. OPM ensures that identifying information is not disclosed in the way that we report our findings.

**Ensuring the safety of participants:** Safe communication platforms (e.g. Teams and Zoom) were used for the interviews.

**Understanding context and respecting cultural sensitivities:** Differences regarding culture, local behaviours and norms, religious beliefs and practices, sexual orientation, gender roles, disability, age, ethnicity, and other social differences, such as class, were respected throughout the interviews.

**United Nations and UNICEF ethics standards:** The United Nations and UNICEF ethics, norms, and standards were followed throughout the RTA, including the rights-based and gender perspective. Attention to human rights and gender equality in the evaluation emphasises the principles of equality, inclusion, and non-discrimination in terms of ensuring that the evaluation questions and data sources are comprehensive, nuanced, and capture data on the most vulnerable, including from a gender perspective (United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), 2011).

# Background

## Education context before COVID-19

Education in the Europe and Central Asia Region (ECAR) has several distinctive features which have shaped both the impact of COVID-19 on the education system, and the necessary responses to this pandemic While drawing attention to the specific characteristics of the education systems in the four countries that are the focus of this report – Turkey, Serbia, BiH, and Azerbaijan – this section discusses the general educational context within ECAR, and thus provides the background to UNICEF’s COVID-19 response.

### Structure of education systems

#### Serbia

The [Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/institutions-34_en) (MoESTD) has the overall responsibility for developing and implementing education policies in Serbia. Schools and preschool institutions have a significant level of autonomy in organising and realising educational programmes and other educational activities. Higher education institutions enjoy wide autonomy.

Institutions at all levels of education can be state (public) and private. Public educational institutions are mainly funded from the state budget. They are financed according to an input-based system. Private educational institutions do not receive any direct or indirect public funding.

MoESTD and competent authorities of the province of Vojvodina monitor the establishment of educational institutions. The procedure is the same for preschool, primary, and secondary education institutions, regardless of the type of their founder. All higher education institutions must be accredited by the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance before obtaining a working licence issued by the ministry.

The educational system in Serbia consists of [early childhood education and care](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/early-childhood-education-and-care-66_en), p[rimary education](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/primary-education-40_en), [secondary education](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/upper-secondary-and-post-secondary-non-tertiary-education-23_en), and [higher education](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/higher-education-66_en). Primary education and preparatory preschool programmes are mandatory and free. Secondary education is free but not mandatory. All citizens have access to higher education under equal conditions.

As of school year 2010/11, there is system-wide implementation of inclusive education. The [Law on Foundations of the Education System (*Zakon o оsnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja*)](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/legislation-58_en) puts an emphasis on the prohibition of discrimination and segregation, individual education plans, a new assessment and evaluation policy, the introduction of teaching assistants, the inclusion of children with special educational needs in regular schools by providing support to schools, and a new financial policy.

#### Turkey

The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) conducts educational activities at a central level in the Republic of Turkey. Education is made up of preschool, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, and higher education.

Primary school education covers children between 69 months and 10 years old and is the responsibility of the General Directorate of Basic Education and MoNE.

Secondary education, namely religious schools and secondary schools, covers children from 10 to 14 years. The actions of the General Directorate of Basic Education and Secondary Education and religious secondary schools are carried out under the responsibility of the General Directorate of Religious Education in MoNE.

Upper secondary education covers Anatolian High Schools, Science High Schools, Schools of Fine Arts, Sports High Schools, Schools of Social Sciences, the Anatolian Religious High Schools, and high schools conducting vocational and technical programmes. Such training is aimed at children aged 14 to 18 years and at those who are above 18 in Vocational Education Centres. It is the responsibility of the General Directorate of Secondary Education, the General Directorate of Vocational and Technical Education, and the General Directorate of Religious Education. Furthermore, schools conducting special training programmes for the training of persons with disabilities and special educational institutions are under the responsibility of the General Directorate of Secondary and High School Level and Special Education and Guidance Services.

#### Azerbaijan

The education system in Azerbaijan is managed by the Cabinet of Ministries and the Ministry of Education (MoE). The Cabinet of Ministries decides the education strategy and supervises implementation of the General Education Law, and the relevant legislative acts and documents. It also defines state standards for education funding, as well as regulation for scholarship and salary payment. The MoE is a central body overseeing the education system. It participates in the development and implementation of the state policy for education. The MoE supervises 4,446 general educational institutions, 52 higher education institutions, 111 vocational institutions, 56 specialised secondary educational institutions, and 1,803 preschool educational institutions. Under the MoE there are several further bodies, including the Institute of Education (IOE), which is a main research body in the education sector.

#### BiH

BiH consists of two entities (Republika Srpska and the Federation of BiH) and Brake district of BiH.

The education sector in BiH reflects the state constitution. It is defined by the [BiH Constitution](http://www.ccbh.ba/public/down/USTAV_BOSNE_I_HERCEGOVINE_engl.pdf), the constitutions of the entities and cantons, and the Statute of Brčko District of BiH, which govern legal competencies in education.

In accordance with this arrangement, 12 institutions are responsible for education in BiH:

* [The Ministry of Education and Culture of Republika Srpska](http://www.vladars.net/eng/vlada/ministries/MEC/Pages/default.aspx) (*[Ministarstvo prosvjete i kulture Republike Srpske](http://www.vladars.net/sr-sp-cyrl/Pages/default.aspx)*);
* 10 cantonal MoEs in the Federation of BiH; and
* the Department for Education of the Brčko District Government (*[Odjeljenje za obrazovanje u Vladi Brčko Distrikta BiH](http://www.bdcentral.net/index.php/ba/odjeljenja-vlade-brko-dsitrikta-bih/obrazovanje)*)

Republika Srpska has a centralised government and one MoE. The Federation of BiH has a decentralised government and consists of 10 cantons, with each canton having its own MoE. The Federal Ministry of Education and Science has only a coordinative role. The Brčko District of BiH has a government with departments, one of which is the Department for Education.

There are also two other ministries with coordinating roles:

The Federal Ministry of Education and Science (*[Federalno ministarstvo obrazovanja i nauke](http://www.fmon.gov.ba/)*) coordinates, among other things, activities within the Federation of BiH, across the 10 cantons.

On a state level, there is [the Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH](http://www.mcp.gov.ba/default.aspx?pageIndex=1&langTag=en-US) (*[Ministarstvo civilnih poslova BiH](http://www.mcp.gov.ba/Default.aspx?langTag=bs-BA&template_id=107&pageIndex=1)*), which coordinates activities within all education institutions in BiH. The Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH is responsible for carrying out activities and tasks within the jurisdiction of BiH related to defining the basic principles of the coordination of activities, the harmonisation of plans, and defining strategy at the international level for (among other areas) education.

On a state level, there are also the following entities:

* [The Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance](http://www.hea.gov.ba/Home.aspx?pageIndex=1) (*[Agencija za razvoj visokog obrazovanja i obezbjeđenje kvaliteta](http://www.hea.gov.ba/Home.aspx?pageIndex=1)*).
* The [Centre for Information and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education](http://www.cip.gov.ba/index.php/en) (*[Centar za informisanje i priznavanje kvalifikacija iz oblasti visokog obrazovanja](http://www.cip.gov.ba/bs)*).
* [The Agency for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education](http://www.aposo.gov.ba/en/) (*Agencija za predškolsko, osnovno i srednje obrazovanje*).

Bodies for the coordination of the education sector have also been formed, including the Conference of Ministers of Education in BiH and the Council for General Education in BiH.

### Education financing before COVID-19

Compared to international benchmarks, education spending in the region is low (OECD/UNICEF, 2021). This is especially concerning considering the significant infrastructural improvements that many schools need. For example, Serbia allocates considerably fewer resources to secondary education on a per student basis and as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) than European Union (EU) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, despite having a very large share of students enrolled in vocational programmes, which tend to be more expensive. Azerbaijan allocates only 2.7% of GDP to all levels of education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021), which is just over half the OECD average of 4.9%.

**In contexts of low-educational financing, education systems are unlikely to be able to adapt to the excess pressures presented by COVID-19.** Teachers who lack competencies for modern pedagogical approaches, and teachers who are poorly paid, for example, are likely to struggle with adapting to online education, and may lack motivation to demonstrate initiative. Large class sizes make social distancing more difficult. Poor educational resources – such as digital devices, textbooks, stationery, and quiet places to work – make learning from home a challenge for students.

Table 2: Education financing in the four focus countries

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| --- | --- |
| Country | Education funding (all levels) as percentage of GDP (year) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021) |
| Azerbaijan | 2.7 (2019) |
| Turkey | 4.3 (2018) |
| Serbia | 3.6 (2019) |
| BiH | 4.4 (2018)[[5]](#footnote-6) |

**Educational resource allocation in these countries is inequitable (OECD/UNICEF, 2021).** Schools with more socioeconomically advantaged student intakes tend to enjoy greater resourcing than schools with more disadvantaged student intakes. Urban schools are often better resourced than rural schools. There are also inequalities related to the economic strength of the local community, not only in terms of resources but also the availability of additional learning support. Inequality is exacerbated at the secondary level. Students in upper secondary schools are highly segregated: low- and high-achieving students are isolated from each other in many Europe and Central Asia (ECA) countries, as are socioeconomically disadvantaged and high-achieving students. This can in part be explained by student choice: students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to attend technical and vocational education and training colleges across the region, with the intention of more quickly entering the labour market.

**Financing inequalities are likely to exacerbate the impact of COVID-19 on learning inequalities.** Students in poorly financed schools and in poor communities and households are likely to be less resilient to the shocks of COVID-19 and are likely to fall further behind in their learning compared to their wealthier peers.

Box 1: Education inequalities in Turkey prior to COVID-19

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| **Turkey** has the highest degree of inter-regional socioeconomic disparity among OECD countries, a pattern that is also reflected in education opportunities and outcomes (OECD, 2016). In 2016, more than a third of young people aged 25–34 had attained a tertiary level of education in the rich western regions of Istanbul and West Anatolia, while less than a quarter had attained this level in the less developed eastern and northern regions (Kitchen *et al.*, 2019). This pre-existing inequity is likely to be compounded by the effects of COVID-19. |

### Enrolment levels before COVID-19

**School enrolment rates in this region are high and have risen significantly over the past two decades.** Universal primary and lower secondary education have been achieved in ECAR, with an average out-of-school rate of 3% in the subregions. With respect to youth of upper secondary school age, substantial progress has been achieved: between 1999 and 2019, the out-of-school rate halved in both the Caucasus and Central Asia (from 31% to 14%) and in Central and Eastern Europe (from 25% to 12%). Much of the latter fall is attributable to decreases in rates in Turkey, where the out-of-school rate dropped by 75% in 15 years (UNESCO, 2021).

Box 2: Education enrolment levels in Serbia prior to COVID-19

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| **Serbia** has particularly high levels of participation at the primary and lower secondary levels. Net enrolment in primary school has remained historically high and equivalent to the OECD average (Maghnouj *et al*., 2020). At 97%, the enrolment rate in lower secondary is higher than the average across OECD countries (91%) and in the Western Balkan region (90%) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). However, disparity around the socioeconomic line persists, with children from the poorest quintile and Roma children having attendance rates much lower than the national average (79% and 61%, respectively) (UNICEF Belgrade, 2020). |

**Within ECAR, there are approximately 3.7 million out-of-school primary and secondary children (UNESCO, 2021).** This includes 850,000 children of primary school age (down from 1.5 million in 1999), 850,000 adolescents of lower secondary school age (down from 2.3 million in 2002), and 2 million youth of upper secondary school age (down from 5.5 million in 1999) who were out of school in 2019 (UNESCO, 2021). According to the Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2021) Turkey accounts for 1.5 million (or just over 40%) of the out-of-school population in the region. Such data do not capture the extent to which children may be attending non-mainstream schools or may be home-schooled.

**A higher share of students from disadvantaged backgrounds drop out before completing secondary school.** In 2015, for example, a fifth of students in Turkey had already left the school system before age 17 (Kitchen *et al*., 2019). An in-depth study by UNICEF of out-of-school children in Turkey identified that low levels of learning in the early years and limited in-school support to students at risk of falling behind were among the main factors contributing to drop-out (UNICEF, 2012).

**A key feature of education in some parts of ECAR is that enrolment into upper secondary education is very academically selective when compared to OECD countries (OECD/UNICEF, 2021).** Relatedly, students in upper secondary schools are highly segregated: low- and high-achieving students are isolated from each other in many ECAR countries, as are socioeconomically disadvantaged and high-achieving students. Given the disparities in educational outcomes in some ECA countries, these findings raise questions about the equity of education systems in the region

### Learning time and outcomes before COVID-19

**Students in ECA countries are provided with significantly less learning time during regular school hours than the OECD average (OECD/UNICEF, 2021).** Overall, this equates to roughly two hours less per week than the OECD average, and as much as five hours less in some countries. However, learning time outside of school tends to be relatively higher in ECA countries: in particular, participation in commercial tutoring.

**Results from the** **Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 reveal that overall outcomes from the region are improving (OECD/UNICEF, 2021).** Many systems that participated in PISA prior to 2018 raised their performance in 2018 and none saw a decrease in performance. Simultaneously, ECA countries are now testing a greater share of 15-year-old students, which demonstrates that educational improvement and expansion of access are not mutually exclusive.

**Nevertheless, performance in ECA countries is generally lower than that of countries across the OECD (OECD/UNICEF, 2021).** The ECAR average in reading, the main domain assessed in PISA 2018, was 421 score points, compared with 487 in the OECD. Achievement within the region also varies greatly, with Georgia scoring 380 in reading and Croatia scoring 479.In ECAR, it is estimated that approximately 19.5 million primary-aged to upper secondary-aged learners were not achieving minimum proficiency levels in foundational skills before the pandemic (42%). Out of the 79 countries that participated in PISA 2018, Turkey ranked 40th, Serbia ranked 45th, BiH ranked 62nd, and Baku (Azerbaijan) ranked 68th This 2018 assessment indicated that 40% of students in Serbia were below the level of functional literacy in mathematics, and 38% did not meet the minimum literacy requirements for reading. In BiH half of all 14-year-olds could read a text but could not explain it, meaning that they were functionally illiterate.

**The PISA 2018 results show that learning outcomes in the region are highly inequitable (OECD/UNICEF, 2021).** Boys perform worse than girls in reading at rates exceeding international averages. In systems with many rural schools, students from urban areas outperform students from rural areas at rates much greater than in similar OECD countries.

### Teachers

**In many ECA countries, teachers are comparatively older than in other regions (OECD/UNICEF, 2021).** Over one in four teachers in Georgia is over 60 (Li *et al*., 2019), and Bulgaria and Georgia have two of the four oldest teaching populations out of all countries that participated in the most recent OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD, 2019). This may help explain teachers’ relatively low levels of digital competence, which negatively impacts their ability to facilitate online learning.

**Teachers in the region are disproportionately female.** The average share of female lower secondary school teachers is 69% in EU countries overall, but among EU countries in the region it ranges from 73% in Romania to 89% in Latvia (UNESCO, 2021).

**Teachers in ECA countries are fully certified and hold master’s degrees at rates similar to teachers in OECD countries (OECD/UNICEF, 2021).** However socioeconomically advantaged and urban schools are more likely to have better qualified teachers. Unlike international benchmarks, however, teacher certification and holding advanced degrees are less positively associated with increased student performance or improved teacher practices, suggesting that the quality of teacher education is low and that these quality assurance mechanisms are not always fulfilling their purposes. With respect to teaching practice, there is no relationship on average between teacher qualifications and the use of adaptive instruction[[6]](#footnote-7)(OECD/UNICEF, 2021).

**Relative to international benchmarks, teachers in ECAR tend to have lower compensation compared to jobs that require similar educational qualifications (Kitchen *et al*., 2017; OECD, 2017), and they tend be less satisfied with their salaries (OECD, 2019).** These factors shape the types of practices that teachers use, how they perceive their status in society, and their motivation to improve, as well as the types of policies that ECA countries develop to support teachers. COVID-19 has placed additional strains and requirements on teachers, and their willingness to adapt to these changes may have been impacted by low satisfaction with their salaries. This extra strain may furthermore lead to higher teacher attrition if teachers are able to receive higher paying jobs outside the teaching profession that offer greater support and put them at lower risk of stress and burnout.

**Broadly speaking, teachers in ECAR continue to rely heavily on traditional pedagogy, such as lecturing to students and asking them to memorise information (UNESCO, 2021).** Research suggests that these techniques might not be as well suited to developing some important skills and competences, and are likely to be less suited to effective online teaching. In response to these challenges, many ECA countries are taking steps to modernise pedagogy and encourage teachers to adapt instruction to individual student needs.

**Psychologists and pedagogues play an important role in improving teaching, cooperating with parents, and, in some countries, supporting teachers’ professional development (UNESCO, 2021).** In Serbia, they are the most important source of support for teachers in developing individualised education plans and differentiating their teaching (Kovač Cerović *et al*., 2016). Psychologists and pedagogues helped to strengthen the resilience of the teaching force during COVID-19, and were a key entry point for UNICEF to engage with teachers in the selected countries.

### Education inclusion

**Identity factors – such as gender, ethnicity, refugee status, and disability – impact students’ learning opportunities within ECAR.**

**One in three students with special education needs in ECAR are still placed in special schools (UNESCO, 2021).** In 15 of the 30 education systems in the region, school admission depends on medical-psychological assessment and other selection procedures. What is considered in some countries to be inclusive pedagogy may instead be a medically defined focus on disability.

**Enrolment rates show (almost) no gender differences at primary and lower secondary levels, however they start to diverge at upper secondary levels.** Among the 26 countries with UNESCO Institute for Statistics data, the widest disparity is found in Turkey, where 95 girls are enrolled for every 100 boys, and Croatia, with 95 boys enrolled for every 100 girls (UNESCO, 2021).

**Despite little or no gender differences in school enrolment rates, gender inequalities are present in other related areas.** In Azerbaijan for example, gender-based violence and its acceptance is high, as is the prevalence of early marriage and gender-based sex selection. These gender differences may impact how education emergencies affect boys and girls differently.

**It is common in the region for schools to lack physical access for children with disabilities, and for teachers to lack experience in working with children with disabilities (UNESCO, 2021).** According to UNICEF data (UNICEF, 2021f), only 17% of school-aged children with disabilities are involved in learning – either at home or in specialised boarding schools. The rest do not receive any school education at all.

**The Roma remain by far the most vulnerable community in the region.** Roma children are at particular risk of school drop-out and are disproportionately diagnosed with intellectual disabilities and placed in special schools (UNESCO, 2021). Poor socioeconomic conditions, child labour, and discrimination and harassment from majority students and teachers, among other causes, leads to low school attendance and drop-outs. The UNICEF Multiple Indicators Cluster Surveys, for example, have cast light on Roma populations’ exclusion from education in south-eastern Europe, especially at the upper secondary school level. About 60% of Roma adolescents of lower secondary school age and youth of upper secondary school age in the Balkans are out of school (UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, there is evidence that gender differences in school enrolment are much higher among Roma when compared with the general population: Roma girls are much more likely to be out of school than Roma boys.

**The region hosts a large number of refugees and internally displaced persons, many of whom are of school-going age, however their numbers fluctuate.** Fluctuations in the number of refugees and migrants poses challenges for education planning. Between January and March 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registered 10,079 refugees and migrants arriving in Serbia, including 135 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children during the first two months, a 41% increase compared to the 5,982 arrivals during the same period last year. Of the 4,460 refugees and migrants housed in asylum and reception centres at the end of March, 418 were children and 123 were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Conversely, BiH experienced a 43% decrease in new arrivals, compared to the same period in 2020. The refugee and migrant population present in the country is estimated at 7,620, with 782 children, including 460 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UNICEF, 2021d).

**Good progress has been made on integrating and enrolling refugee and asylum-seeking children into public schools (UNESCO, 2021).** This progress can largely be attributed to policies in both Turkey and Serbia which mandated the inclusion of refugee and asylum-seeking students in the mainstream education system (see Box 3 and Box 4 below).

Box 3: Refugee children in the Turkish education system

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| **Turkey** hosts the largest number of refugees in the world (UNESCO, 2021). 3.4 million registered Syrian refugees were living in the country in 2017. Approximately half were below the age of 18, while 30% were below the age of 11 (UNHCR, 2017). The number of Syrian refugee children included in formal education reached 684,728 as at December 2019, representing an increase of 6.5% by comparison with the 2018/19 school year and 39% by comparison with the 2016/17 school year. Integration into the national school system has continued to accelerate, with 96% of refugee children attending Turkish public schools (UNICEF, 2020a). The inclusion process has been supported by Promoting the Integration of Syrian Children to the Turkish Education System, a project that received EUR 300 million as part of the EU’s EUR 3 billion Facility for Refugees in Turkey (Delegation of the European Union in Turkey, 2017). Two-fifths of this financed school construction, while the rest was allocated to Turkish and Arabic language courses, catch-up education and remedial classes, free school transport, education materials, an examination system, guidance and counselling, training of 15,000 teachers, and the hiring of administrative personnel (Arik Akyuz, 2018). Despite this significant progress, about 400,000 Syrian refugee children, particularly adolescents, remain out of school. |

Box 4: Refugee children in the Serbian education system

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| **Serbia** has similarly opted for the inclusion of refugee and asylum-seeking students in the education system, with schools obliged to prepare and implement support plans at the school and individual levels. These plans cover aspects such as adaptation and stress relief, intensive learning of Serbian, participation in regular syllabus and extracurricular activities, and adaptation of the school attendance schedule and teaching materials. By 2018/19, about 2,500 or 98% of pre- and primary school-aged children in reception centres had been placed in public schools (Serbia Government, 2019). |

Internal regional instability has also affected learning opportunities. The conflict in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region of the Republic of Azerbaijan between September and November 2020 disrupted education services during a crucial period in which schools across the rest of the country were able to partially reopen following COVID-19 closures and to provide education through blended learning models (partially remote, partially in-person education). Across the nine districts assessed, 95% of schools stopped functioning (providing direct or remote classes) during the conflict period, for an average duration of five weeks. During this period, 57% of school key informants reported that the schools asked children to continue learning activities and 61% reported that schools asked teachers to continue teaching activities if possible. However, 73% of caregivers reported that their children had to stop educational activities due to the conflict, missing an average of seven weeks of learning, largely due to a combination of internet/electricity blackouts as well as being displaced due to conflict.

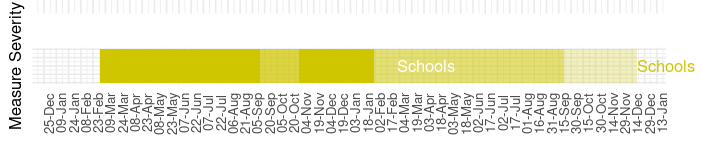
## The pandemic’s effects on education

### Educational access

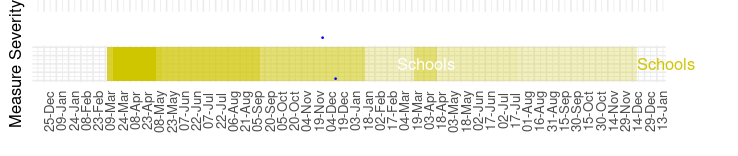
**School closures in ECAR affected nearly 50 million children in 20 countries during the first nationwide lockdowns in March 2020 (UNICEF, 2021a).** While intensive support was provided to ensure safe school reopening, at the end of 2020, 26.6 million children remained impacted by partial school closures. In Turkey and BiH most schools closed for a total of 49 weeks (UNICEF, 2021a), followed by Azerbaijan where schools were closed for 48 weeks, and Serbia where schools were closed for 38 weeks. These represent some of the longest school closures in the world[[7]](#footnote-8). According to the WHO[[8]](#footnote-9) data on public health and social measures, the following graphs demonstrate the actions taken by the national governments in the four RTA countries to suppress or stop the spread of COVID-19 by occasional school closures. As shown below[[9]](#footnote-10), all four RTA countries introduced the most severe measures at the start of the pandemic from around February-March 2020 suspending in-person teaching on all levels. Such measures stayed in place until August-September 2020 in Azerbaijan and Turkey, while in BiH and Serbia they lasted until May 2020. Except for BiH, all three other countries re-introduced similarly strict measures later: Azerbaijan from November 2020 to January 2021, Turkey from November 2020 to February 2021, and Serbia from June to August 2020. At a time, countries introduced partial suspension of in-person teaching on some levels or categories. For example, in Azerbaijan such measures took place between September to November 2020, in BiH from May to September 2020, in Turkey from August to November 2020, from February to April 2021 and from May to August 2021, and in Serbia from May to June 2020, from November 2020 to January 2021, and from March to August 2021. Among the four countries, Azerbaijan and Turkey had the longest spells of total suspension of in-person teaching, while BiH and Serbia had longer periods of adapting in-person teaching.

School closures in four RTA countries from 15 January 2020 to 20 December 2021

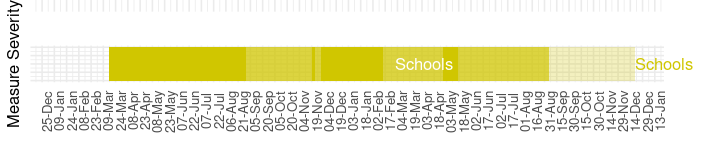
Azerbaijan



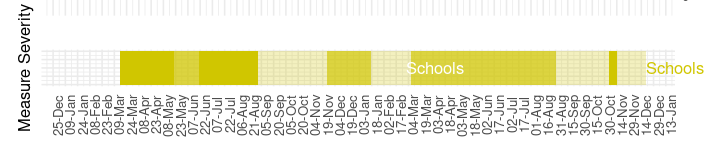
BiH



Turkey



Serbia



**Access to learning was affected by variable rates of internet access across the region (World Bank, 2021).** Of the four focus countries, BiH has the lowest internet penetration rate, at only 73.2%, while Azerbaijan has the highest internet penetration rate, at 81.1% (World Bank, 2021). However, UNICEF surveys suggest that only 70% of school children there had access to devices on which to access remote learning (United Nations, Azerbaijan Socioeconomic Assessment for COVID-19, 2020).

Table 3: Internet penetration in four focus countries (World Bank, 2021)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Country | Individuals using the internet (% of population) |
| BiH | 73.2 (2020) |
| Serbia | 78.4 (2020) |
| Turkey | 77.7 (2020) |
| Azerbaijan | 81.1 (2019) |

**Many children were not consistently engaged in education during this period.** In Azerbaijan, for example, assessment findings show that only around three-quarters of all age/gender groups were following or trying to follow their curriculum remotely. Furthermore, the learning was unequal as was the participation. In BiH, people in urban areas were more likely to be engaged in education during the crisis (41%) whereas vulnerable categories were significantly less likely to be engaged in education (28%) (UNICEF/UNDP, 2021).

**UNICEF estimated that during the peak of school closures, in Europe and Central Asia, 1 in 3 learners were not reached by digital and broadcast remote learning. The figure for vulnerable learners who actually engaged in digital and remote learning would have been even lower (UNICEF, 2020e).** For those without internet access, with inadequate device availability, those in rural areas, and other marginalized children, providing paper-based learning remained an important mode for ensuring that they could continue to learn. In May 2020, 7 COs reported that paper-based solutions were being used as part of governments’ distance learning response, compared to 9 COs reporting this in Quarter 1 of 2021.

**Many schools began to open in May and June 2021.** Some 12 million children were able to return to classrooms either full- or part-time. However, school re-engagement[[10]](#footnote-11) is not guaranteed. At the time of data collection (September 2021) KIIs expected that students – particularly the most vulnerable – would not return to school in September 2021.

### Learning losses

**School closures may lead to learning losses equivalent to a third to a full year of schooling**. Experts foresee that learning loss due to the pandemic will be significant in both the short and long term, both globally and across the region (UNICEF, 2021c). Using data from 174 countries, Azevedo *et al*. (2021) estimate that school closures could result in a loss of between 0.3 and 1.1 years of schooling. In ECA, they calculated that, based on PISA data, 31% of 15-year-olds were below the Level 2 basic skills threshold across literacy, numeracy, and science before the pandemic and that this proportion was expected to rise to 39% or 48%, depending on scenarios.

**School closures are likely to exacerbate inequalities, by disproportionately affecting students from disadvantaged backgrounds.** Experts agree on the differentiated impact on different groups: in particular, widening inequalities between the highest and lowest wealth quintile. Direct linkages have been made between learning loss, skills loss, and GDP losses, with estimates of a 1.5% GDP loss for the remainder of the century (Hanushek and Woessman, 2020). In the Western Balkans it is expected that learning inequalities between socioeconomic groups will widen in the sub-region from 1.5 to two equivalent years of schooling. In this scenario, the share of students below the proficient PISA Level 2 in literacy, already significant in the sub-region at 53%, would increase to 61%. This means that almost two out of three students in the Western Balkans could fall back into functional illiteracy (World Bank Group, 2020)

**Due to the crisis and/or loss of learning, school drop-outs could be significant.** Low-income or vulnerable children are at the highest risk of drop-out. This can be due either to social protection issues – such as early marriage, pregnancy, or child labour – or as a result of failure to transition to the next grade. Recent data from the Azerbaijan Education in Emergencies Needs Assessment (UNICEF, 2021b) suggests that COVID-19 may be negatively impacting girls’ enrolment in upper secondary school.

**The pandemic has likely had a long-term impact on student learning outcomes.** This is because young children who have missed out on key parts of the curriculum are less likely to benefit from their lessons once they return to school.

**Routine assessments were suspended during the lockdowns.** This means that the extent of the learning losses is unknown both to teachers and policymakers. Efforts at remedial learning – while essential – are therefore hard to design.

### Mental and physical wellbeing

**With the closure of businesses and loss of jobs, the economic instability faced by many families adversely affects both the physical and mental wellbeing of children.** In all, the pandemic is estimated to push an additional 2.2 million under the US$ 3.20 a day poverty line in the region, with household surveys in some countries, particularly in Central Asia, reporting an uptick in food insecurity (World Bank, 2021). Some of the most vulnerable countries struggle with acute child malnutrition, which can have long-term consequences for children’s ability to learn. Likewise, child protection issues, including increased child marriage, child pregnancy, and child labour, impact on the likelihood that children will return to schools as they reopen.

**Mental health problems have increased during the pandemic.** In 2020, region-wide consultations with 15,000 adolescents and young people conducted by UNICEF and the European Training Foundation revealed that interrupted schooling and uncertain job prospects have increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression in all countries (UNICEF, 2021a). It is anticipated that these mental health effects will negatively impact learning.

## Government responses to the pandemic

To mitigate the educational challenges triggered by different stages of the pandemic, the focus countries responded in several important ways. This section outlines some of the ways in which the countries sought to maintain safe and inclusive continuity of learning throughout the pandemic.

**As schools closed in March 2020, many countries in the region were quick to facilitate distance learning, either online through provision of access to information and communication technology (ICT) and internet for students and teachers, via television programmes, or through physical books and photocopies being distributed to students.** As schools began to partially reopen, blended learning – a combination of distance and face-to-face learning – became more common. In mid-March 2021 15 UNICEF COs in ECAR reported that blended learning was being used, three COs reported the use of fully in-person delivery, and one CO reported that fully distanced learning was being used.

**Once schools began to reopen – often in stages – it became necessary to support education stakeholders in promoting good hygiene and social distancing.** Hygiene supplies were distributed to schools in the region, and lessons were staggered in order to promote social distancing. This meant that there were periods of time when children were attending school in-person for two to three days a week.

**For most teachers across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic was the first time they had facilitated distance or digital learning, and in ECAR many lacked the necessary pedagogical and technical skills to** use digitally-supported teaching to reach all children effectively and inclusively**.**Governments in ECAR responded by providing online workshops, webinars, and training for teachers. This training largely covered digital competencies, online pedagogies, and psychosocial training and support.

Below are brief descriptions of how the governments of each of the four focus countries addressed issues of education during the pandemic.

#### Serbia

When schools closed in March 2020, the Serbian MoESTD prepared an operational plan for distance learning. As a part of distance learning, MoESTD prepared and recorded TV classes that were broadcast from 17 March to 29 May 2020 by national and regional public broadcasters, as well as on local and minority media. The schedule of TV lessons for all primary and secondary school students was available online. Data collected by UNICEF, the MoESTD and the Institute of Psychology indicated that 95% of primary schools, and 63.9% of secondary schools followed classes via television channels (UNICEF, 2020b). In addition, with support from UNICEF and the EU, MoESTD launched the *Moja škola* e-learning management system, which is open source software widely used in Serbia to access lessons hosted on the state broadcaster’s video-on-demand service. Schools were also instructed to come up with their own ways of conducting distance learning using collaboration software, and a number of textbook publishers offered free digital versions to students in the country. Additionally, the Serbian Government received support from UNICEF to purchase the Camtasia software for recording distance learning classes in schools, procuring some 79 software licences.

Government responses also supported the use of other digital tools through public–private partnerships. For example, Microsoft and its local partner Informatika prepared instructions for teachers on the use of its Office 365 platform. The video conference platform Zoom began to be offered in schools across Serbia, with free internet access provided by the MTS Telecom and Telenor mobile networks. Additionally, MoESTD also formalised cooperation with the Viber app. Local press reported that students were following classes on television through many online platforms, such as Google Classroom. It was also announced that a local hardware company, Comtrade, had donated the platform ‘My classroom TeslaEDU’ for online teaching and testing of students in their final year of primary school. This platform was free for teachers and students during the crisis. Furthermore, students enrolled in the eighth and final year of primary school who did not have access to online classes received internet access and devices (mobile phones and tablets) from Huawei (100 tablets), Comtrade (300 mobile phones), Telecom (800 Internet cards and 800 mobile phones), VIP (800 internet cards and 400 mobile phones), and Telenor (which donated the same number as VIP).

In addition, MoESTD, in collaboration with national councils of national minorities, organised distance learning in the eight minority languages. In the first few months when the pandemic started, around 3,000 classes were recorded in the eight languages and broadcast on regional state television and local minority television channels. Links to recorded classes were also made available on the websites of the national councils of the national minorities.

To complement the introduction of a ‘Digital World’ subject, training and investments in digital technologies in education were prioritised by the Government of Serbia, with enhanced opportunities for e-learning for students and teachers. Digital textbooks were introduced in the system and, so far, 23,600 teachers have been trained within the project ‘Digital classroom/Digitally Competent Teacher-introduction of electronic textbooks and digital educational materials’.

The Serbian Government has developed several strategies to address the pre-existing inequalities in internet access. The strategy ‘Development of Education in the Republic of Serbia until 2030’ was adopted in 2021. One of its key objectives, embodied by Specific Goal 1.3, is to ‘establish foundations for the development of digital education at the pre-university level’. More specifically, regarding the development of digital pre-university education, the focus will be on supporting institutions in pre-university education to improve not only the digital competencies of students, but also the digital competencies of education employees through the implementation and promotion of innovative approaches that include integrating ICTs into teaching and learning. During the implementation of the strategy, support will be provided to help schools organise hybrid and online teaching in a systematic way. In addition, a set of indicators for the long-term monitoring of digital education development will be defined, with the aim of establishing a system of continuous monitoring of the development of digital education.

#### Azerbaijan

As an immediate response strategy to ensure the continuity of school education, the MoE launched a remote education project on two national TV channels on 13 March 2020. Between March and June 2020, over 1,600 TV lessons for all grades and subjects were produced and broadcast nationwide. Another important strategy introduced by the MoE was the Virtual School digital learning platform, in partnership with Microsoft Azerbaijan, which made use of the MS Teams platform. Within two months, over 1 million primary and secondary school students and teachers from all regions of the country had self-registered with the platform. The Virtual School provides a collaborative learning and communication space, and access to a variety of education materials for learning and teaching, including tests, textbooks, and useful third-party instruments for learning. An estimated 530,000 children are active users of the Virtual School platform.

To address the gap in digital skills for teaching as the pandemic continued, the MoE, in cooperation with private sector partners, started providing online training on the use of MS Teams for 14,000 school teachers. A series of training videos was developed to support a wider audience of educators and students. Moreover, in agreement with the Ministry of Transportation, Communication and Higher Technologies, several mobile companies provided internet access to about 40,000 school teachers (26% of the total in the country). Another critical measure taken by the government was to ensure that all teachers, school leaders, and other school staff retained their salaries and other incentives during the school closure period.

#### BiH

In all governance units, online classes for all grades of primary and secondary education were introduced at the beginning of the pandemic. Although there were slight variations in the start date, none of the units went a long time without any classes. The level of IT competencies within schools was upgraded with the support of international organisations, UNICEF, and foreign embassies. Large telecom companies extended internet connections to homes and families that did not have internet access. TV broadcasting of classes started on BiH's major TV channels, BHRT and RTRS, with some cantons introducing TV classes on their cantonal televisions. Some MoEs introduced online learning platforms (for schools which follow Croatian language curricula and for schools in Republika Srpska), combined with other online teaching tools. For most of the units, online teaching was provided using Google Classroom, MS Teams and MS Office, Zoom, Moodle, Skype, school registers and websites, Viber, email, and other social networks. Some teachers used phones and SMS.

For children without access to ICT, teachers were instructed to print out learning materials, which were either picked up by parents on a weekly basis, delivered to the child’s home address, or explained via phone. There were also drives to encourage donations of ICT equipment to children without such equipment.

#### Turkey

In mid-April 2020, MoNE launched a free, hybrid, *ad hoc* television and online model to complement the *Eğitim Bilişim Ağı* (Educational Informatics Network) (EBA) project, which has become the cornerstone of Turkey’s educational response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a two-fold strategy for distance learning involving broadcasting lessons on television and – as a complementary catch-up measure – utilising digital learning and teaching resources to deliver curriculum via EBA, the project covered the main subjects set out in the country’s curriculum, serving nearly 18 million students as well as their teachers and parents. Three television channels were reserved to undertake the project in the context of the pandemic, including the creation of a new channel called EBA TV, in a partnership between Turkish Radio Television and EBA. As at 18 June 2021, the ministry reported that EBA had been visited 23,769,308,322 times, and that 14,111,941 students and 1,177,725 teachers had actively benefited from the online EBA platform. The EBA mobile application has reached 31 million downloads for Android devices and 3.1 million downloads for iOS devices.

Towards the end of 2020, the platform also began to host live synchronous classes (with priority for those teaching national examination candidates) and to offer adaptive support tools powered by machine learning. More specifically, all classes were granted access to an unlimited number of live synchronous classes, and both preschool students and students in grades 1 to 12 could follow an unlimited number of lessons between 8.30 a.m. and 8.20 p.m. every day except Sunday. There are more than 1 900 lessons and more than 60 000 interactive content elements available. Thousands of books and a question bank to be used by teachers are also available, and the online resources can be accessed via desktop, tablet, mobile phone and other smart devices. The three major mobile network operators in the country also offered 6 to 8 GB of free data access for those enrolling in the EBA platform. Data from the EBA platform allows teachers and families to track students’ progress and overall learning performance. As at 18 June 2021, 300 122 722 hours of live synchronous classes had been held. In addition to the efforts described above, an ‘assistant’ function was integrated into EBA in order to respond instantly to user questions, solve problems, and ensure that EBA is used effectively, complete with a free internet package offered by agreement with mobile network operators.

Professional development for teachers continued with numerous courses via EBA and a YouTube channel, with UNESCO Turkey developing 17 new online courses for teachers, aiming to reach around 125,000 teachers during the closures. Through the My Preference programme, university information days continued remotely. Information packs, promotional brochures, and videos were prepared for students selecting upper secondary general and vocational courses. Turkey maintained tertiary and upper secondary selection examinations, but postponed them to late June 2020 and the scope of the assessed material was narrowed. Examination preparation activities, including example questions and solutions, were offered via EBA and television.

MoNE published a psycho-educational activities booklet to support young children’s emotional resilience, as well as guidebooks for students and their families. A telephone hotline staffed by 1,375 counsellors based in Guidance and Research Centres across the country was launched to offer advice and support to parents and their children.

To facilitate the period of online education, Turkish internet providers committed to supplying all students with between 5 and 8 GB of free data during the period of school closures. MoNE launched a mobile application providing targeted content for students with special educational needs and their parents and teachers, complementing the content already published on EBA. Provincial call centres were established across the country to enable teachers to support and communicate with children with special educational needs and their families.

The EBA platform allows teachers, parents, and students themselves to monitor student participation and track learning performance. MoNE has also been monitoring traffic to the EBA

Additionally, MoNE announced a collaboration with Turkish Radio Television and Türksat, whereby they launched three high definition and three standard definition education channels for all students in compulsory education. Furthermore, more than 2,000 vulnerable Syrian and Turkish children were provided with remote homework assistance, and more than 3,000 children, including more than 1 800 out-of-school children, were provided with support in language skills development through UNICEF-supported Turkish language courses provided by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Turkish Red Crescent, and Kilis municipality. The programme was adapted and delivered remotely via phone, WhatsApp, and small face-to-face group sessions, enabling refugee children to be integrated into local communities and Turkish public schools.

# Descriptions of UNICEF’s education response to the COVID-19 pandemic

UNICEF COs supported the education sector in a variety of ways throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The support provided by UNICEF was often in response to the expressed needs of MoEs. Most forms of support were provided in collaboration with governments or CSO partners. Support differed in regard to its sphere of action. In Turkey, for example, the CO often took a ‘hands on’ approach, facilitating projects which directly served children and families. The BiH CO, in contrast, saw its role more in terms of systems support and the strengthening of policies that would have a long-term influence on the education sector’s emergency resilience.

This section offers descriptions of five of the approaches that UNICEF COs took in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: continuity of learning, safe school reopening, teacher support, data collection and monitoring, and system-level support. A summary of these approaches can be found in the table below. The selection of these specific areas of response was informed by the feedback received from Regional Education Adviser on the most important areas of focus for this report at the inception stage, which was consistent with and enabled our light-touch formative approach to the RTA. The following section assesses this response according to the criteria of effectiveness, relevance, adaptability, equity, and inclusion. The analysis of effectiveness, relevance, and adaptability considers these in terms of processes implemented and – to the extent possible – achieving quantifiable indicators.

Table 4: Summary of UNICEF COVID-19 education responses

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | System-level support | Continuity of learning | Safe school reopening | Teacher support | Data collection and monitoring |
| Serbia | * Supported MoESTD to develop a national response plan for preschool education system in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. | * Developed ‘tech libraries’ and ‘EdTech Labs’ where students could access internet and devices. * Produced relevant software for the recording of lessons, ICT equipment, and video editing services. * Provided digital equipment to three reception and asylum centres to support formal education and learning for children on the move, including language and digital skills development, in cooperation with the Akelius Foundation. * Supported launch of *Moja skola* e-learning management system. |  | * Provided capacity strengthening for teachers and mentors to provide additional learning and support for children on the move. * Provided online training seminars. * Assisted MoESTD in supporting teachers to develop interactive materials for the national online learning platform and prepare television lessons by procuring Camtasia and video editing software. Worked with the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, which has provided training on formative assessment, including in distance learning, to approximately 4,500 teachers. * Worked with Institute for the Improvement of Education to establish a digital support service for planning and implementing distance instruction and, more generally, digital learning. This web portal aims to help teachers in preparing materials for distance and digital learning and also contains materials for psychologists and education experts, who also organise regular webinars. | * Supported a large-scale study of learning, particularly among vulnerable groups. * Conducted an RTA of the attitudes of students who are over 15 years old. * Conducted U-reports periodically to collect the views of children and adolescents on distance learning. |
| Turkey | * Collaborated with Turkish Government on sending information related to COVID-19 to support Syrian refugees using RapidPro SMS technology. * Worked with MoNE to write an educational technologies strategy document to bring a technology perspective to some post-COVID-19 educational activities. | * Assisted with development of online learning platform (EBA). * Increased bandwidth coverage for the EBA platform. * Established 170 ‘EBA centres’ for students without internet access at home. * Distributed learner toolkits. * 3,000 children were provided with support in language skills development through UNICEF-supported Turkish language courses. | * Distributed hygiene supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) to schools. | * Supported needs-based training in delivering distance learning, reaching more than 196,000 teachers by the end of 2020. |  |
| Azerbaijan | * Identified relevant donors. | * Helped to develop protocols for schools in regard to online learning. | * Facilitated purchase of infrared thermometers by the MoE for all schools through UNICEF Supply Division. * Provided schools with hygiene supplies, including masks and hand sanitisers. * Helped to develop protocol for schools in regard to safe school reopening. | * Capacity building of 3,000 school teachers on social and emotional skills. * Capacity building of over 300 school psychologists in psychological first aid in schools during crises and emergencies. | * Supported United Nations Socioeconomic Assessment for COVID-19 (August 2020). * Conducted a National Learning Assessment which monitored the learning losses caused as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown. * Initiated an Education in Emergencies Needs Assessment (April 2021) which reported on the education disruption caused both by COVID-19 and the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. |
| BiH | * Brought together international organisations working in education to harmonise approaches and interventions. * Advocated for prioritisation of education. | * Negotiated with internet providers to expand internet access. * Piloted assistive technology project. * Delivered learning materials to disadvantaged children. * Provided internet access to 1,968 children. | * Supported the dissemination of the Framework for Reopening Schools. * Distributed hygiene supplies and PPE to schools. | * Connected teachers to digital education experts. * Compiled document entitled ‘Open Digital Educational Tools for Interactive Communication’, containing a list of tools for educators. * Provided psychosocial and mental health support to teachers. * Supported training of teachers in delivering distance learning, reaching more than 4,600 teachers by end of 2020. | * Presented and shared findings from Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA) on children’s learning. * Supported education authorities in analysing the quality of digital learning. |

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## System-level support

UNICEF offered system-level support to the education sector in three main ways throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The first was by **coordinating partners**, which helped to ensure that the available resources were deployed in a strategic way. The second was by **developing standards and guidelines**, which not only helped stakeholders understand what was required, but also ensured that the quality of education was safeguarded. The third was through **advocacy**, which UNICEF used to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable children were being considered.

In regard to coordinating partners, UNICEF’s role was different in different countries. In Turkey, for example, which has a very large CO and many partners, UNICEF supported government to establish four sector working groups at the national level, and more at the sub-national level, to monitor the COVID-19 situation closely and update partners on needs. Every six weeks UNICEF organised a sector group meeting, thus creating a platform where opportunities and information could be shared. In Azerbaijan, in contrast, there is only one person working on the UNICEF education team, and she identified a lack of implementing partners within the education sector.

UNICEF is working with government entities and . However, UNICEF Azerbaijan was commended for the quality of its personal relationships within the sector, and its ability to identify the relevant donors and leverage financial support.

In BiH, UNICEF tried to support the Ministries of Education to coordinate partners but had little success, since requests for support by UNICEF were not responded to by coordinating partners. In part this was due to the highly decentralised education sector in BiH, which has 14 MoEs, of which 12 have executive roles (resulting in 12 education systems). Many of these ministries have limited in-house capacities, and these limitations were exacerbated by COVID-19, which meant that many staff were on sick leave. As a result, ministries were not able to provide immediate data, and were slow in responding to requests. Instead, UNICEF continually supported the state-level and federal BiH ministries to fulfil their coordination role, rather than taking over the coordination role. UNICEF also collaborated with international partners, especially with other United Nations agencies. For example, UNICEF coordinated the development of the concept note for education, which is part of the United Nations BiH Offer for Socioeconomic Response and Recovery with regard to the COVID-19 impact in BiH.

In Serbia key informants strongly asserted that UNICEF was not a coordinator in the sector but rather a ‘glue’ that brought the sector together and was able to share information between partners.

In regard to developing standards and guidelines, several COs realised that the standards available were not sufficient for digital learning. In BiH, for example, digital devices were being donated to schools or procured by the government that were not optimal for learning. UNICEF BiH therefore started a process of standardising the digital devices and infrastructure that schools require for digital and online learning.

Serbia similarly noted a lack of teacher standards relating to digital competencies, which meant that it was difficult to develop suitable training for teachers. Equally, the regular curriculum was not developed for online learning. This posed a challenge when trying to monitor the quality of learning online, since it was not clear what was expected of teachers.

Lastly, in regard to advocacy, UNICEF’s two primary concerns were the reopening of schools and provision for the most vulnerable children. Data demonstrating the impact of school closures on children was helpful in this regard. As well as convincing governments, UNICEF COs were very effective at advocating for donors to fund interventions, or at times to reallocate already pledged funds to be used for COVID-19 responses. In particular, Serbia exceeded its 2020 fundraising goals by 100%.

## Continuity of learning

UNICEF’s support for continuity of learning took two forms. UNICEF supported governments in developing **guidelines for remote learning** (UNICEF, 2020c; UNICEF, 2013), which enabled the development of teacher training materials, and gave teachers direction for how they should proceed with the online modality. UNICEF also helped to **make distance learning more accessible**, which was particularly important for vulnerable children who would otherwise have been excluded from education.

In regard to developing guidelines for remote learning, UNICEF was able to draw on global guidance very early in the pandemic in order to develop guidelines for schools, principals, and teachers who were operating remotely. In Azerbaijan, for example, UNICEF worked to convince both the MoE and IOE that clear instructions would be essential in an education culture with extensive regulation, where teachers required clear expectations. For example, UNICEF Azerbaijan gave technical and financial support to the IOE, which developed protocols and instructions for schools in regard to how to switch to online learning and plan lessons. UNICEF Azerbaijan was later approached to help develop similar protocols for schools that serve children with disabilities.

As the pandemic continued UNICEF COs developed several innovative approaches to ensure that distance learning was accessible to as many children as possible. In Turkey, for example, MoNE transformed EBA from a repository of documents to an online platform where children could follow lessons and classrooms interactively. During this time, UNICEF Turkey supported MoNE to increase EBA’s bandwidth, enabling more children to connect at the same time. MoNE also provided 12,000 EBA centres, which were multi-purpose centres in schools and community centres where children who did not have access to the internet or devices could access EBA. UNICEF Turkey supported 170 EBA centres, specifically targeting provinces and districts where there are many refugee children.

For those who could not access EBA, UNICEF Turkey distributed learner toolkits to 75,000 of the most vulnerable children, containing stationery, books, and hygiene materials.

UNICEF Serbia piloted a similar approach to UNICEF Turkey in the form of ‘tech libraries’, where children can borrow devices, as well as SIM cards, which enable them to have internet connectivity at home. This concept served as a catalyst for other organisations and private donors to support implementation of the same concept in other schools, thus fulfilling UNICEF’s aim. At the moment, these services are limited to 30 low-income schools; however, it is hoped this will soon be expanded. UNICEF Serbia also supported EdTech lab installations in refugee centres and provided online learning support to refugee and migrant children. Complementing this approach, UNICEF Serbia also developed a list of digital tools for distance learning that could be used by teachers.

In BiH, UNICEF took several approaches, depending on the needs of the canton-level MoEs. It negotiated with an internet provider to make the internet available to students until the end of the year and provided funding to equip schools with digital devices. UNICEF BiH is now piloting an assistive technology project, which is a package of devices and support for schools which aims to increase inclusive education, particularly for children with disabilities.

## Safe school reopening

According to WHO dataset[[11]](#footnote-12), the national governments’ approach to school reopening varied from country to country. Schools in BiH and Serbia experienced longer period of relatively relaxed teaching measures when they were recommended/required to adapt in-person teaching, for example, by introducing physical distancing, hand hygiene, staggered arrival, separate entrances, etc. In BiH such measures were in place almost throughout from January to November 2021 with a short spell of stricter measures in place during March – April 2021, whereas in Serbia, a similar approach was introduced on and off from August 2020 to December 2021.

UNICEF’s support for safe school reopening took two forms. UNICEF helped to develop **guidance on how to reopen schools safely**, which helped to set a standard for principals to follow and communicate to parents and students. UNICEF also provided **hygiene supplies and PPE for schools to help reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading** in schools, and thus filled a gap that government budgets had not anticipated.

As schools began to reopen, UNICEF COs were able to draw on international best practices from the UNICEF regional offices and Headquarters. This enabled them to provide guidance very quickly on reopening schools safely. In Turkey, for example, UNICEF supported MoNE in regard to communications and messaging by communicating guidance on hygiene practices for schools which were reopening. In BiH UNICEF distributed printed posters to every school which communicated the COVID-19 protection measures that were received through the global advocacy toolkit. UNICEF Turkey also supported social distancing when schools reopened by ensuring that information was made available to parents regarding the changing schedule for school opening.

In regard to the supply of hygiene materials for schools, UNICEF Turkey prepared a menu of materials that schools could choose from, including face masks, hand sanitisers etc. Schools were then able to choose which supplies they wanted within a set budget, and according to their needs. UNICEF BiH took a similar approach by distributing a hygiene kit to every school in the country, having first assessed the supply needs of competent MoEs. In Azerbaijan UNICEF facilitated the purchase of infrared thermometers by the MoE for all schools, through the UNICEF Supply Division. UNICEF also provided schools with hygiene supplies, including masks and hand sanitisers.

## Teacher support

Teacher support formed a significant part of UNICEF’s work at the height of the pandemic during the period of school closures. Teachers required **support in developing basic digital competencies, digital pedagogies, formative assessment in digital environments, and psychosocial support**. The move to the online modality for teacher training enabled a larger number of teachers to participate and reduced delivery costs. In Serbia, for example, UNICEF had developed a national education platform for teachers in 2017 which was repurposed for teacher training and which trained more than 52,000 teachers in one year. In BiH 20 teacher training webinars were organised. These took place in 2020 and were implemented by the selected cantonal ministries of education, with UNICEF financial and technical support. They reached 4,600 teachers, and a programme for psychosocial support is now beginning, with a focus on female teachers.

UNICEF Turkey similarly provided capacity development opportunities for 196,000 teachers on distance learning and learning during school closures. The content of the training courses included how to interact with children online, how to use Teams or Zoom, mental health training, psychosocial support, and how to identify mental health distress in children. UNICEF Turkey also helped to develop a training programme for early childhood development and primary school teachers, entitled ‘Building Teachers Capacity on Teaching Basic Literacy and Numeracy in Online Settings’, which aims to equip teachers with the capacity to teach basic literacy and numeracy in hybrid settings.

UNICEF Azerbaijan supported the implementation of the State Programme on Inclusive Education. This involved the introduction of a teacher training programme the formal pre- and in-service teacher training curriculum. This intervention was not a direct response to the pandemic, however, as it finished at the beginning of the pandemic; nevertheless, it indirectly provided teachers with some helpful insights and methodologies for addressing the learning needs of children, particularly children with special needs in education

In Azerbaijan, the provision of psychosocial support to teachers was first offered only to those teachers who were affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Following the escalation of the military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in September 2020, a significant portion of the population (including children) in the line of contact districts in Azerbaijan were affected. The situation was exacerbated by the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, closure of schools, and limited social contact and development activities for most children over an extended period of time, all leading to accumulated stress, anxieties, pressures, and trauma for children and adolescents.

UNICEF Azerbaijan, in cooperation with the MoE and with financial support from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, initiated a project on school-based mental health and psychosocial support for children and adolescents in emergency contexts. The project ran from January to May 2021 in nine conflict-affected regions of Azerbaijan. The purpose was to improve the psychological status and wellbeing of children and adolescents affected by the conflict through school-based psychosocial support provided by teachers and psychologists. The project interventions included capacity building of 3,000 schoolteachers on social and emotional skills and capacity building of over 300 school psychologists in psychological first aid in schools during crises and emergencies. Moreover, the Basic Life Skills programme was piloted in schools in three districts heavily affected by the conflict to help over 2,300 adolescent boys and girls better cope with stress and psychological pressures. Awareness raising sessions on children’s mental health and psychosocial support needs covered about 1,000 parents in the conflict-affected areas.

Although this psychosocial training was initially developed for those affected by war, experience suggested that the participating teachers had been more traumatised by COVID-19 than the conflict. UNICEF Azerbaijan and the IOE are therefore preparing to introduce socio-emotional learning more widely as an aspect of teacher preparation.

In Serbia, UNICEF and the Institute for the Improvement of Education established a digital support service for planning and implementing distance instruction and, more generally, digital learning. This newly instated web portal aims to help teachers in preparing materials for distance and digital learning and also contains materials for psychologists and education experts, who comprise a growing community of professionals who also organise regular webinars and thematic meetings at the national level. The portal is operating as part of a partnership between MoESTD, UNICEF and the Pedagogic Society of Serbia. By the end of 2020, with UNICEF’s support, more than 41 500 teachers had been trained to implement distance teaching.6

UNICEF RO approach to Reimagine Education is LearnInwhich is a digital learning initiative designed to support both teachers and students as lifelong learners (UNICEF, 2021g). LearnIn is being designed to provide quality, personalised, and culturally relevant learning opportunities within a digital environment, fostering collaboration and shared practice. Five countries in ECA are currently engaged in the LearnIn initiative, including Serbia and BiH. A feasibility study is underway to explore the specific needs in each country based on their national priorities, challenges, and opportunities.

## Data collection and monitoring

Data collection and monitoring was a very large part of all the COs’ work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. UNICEF was often able to collect data on access to learning at speed, which helped to **identify the most vulnerable children**, and then used the data to **advocate for government intervention or donor support**. The data that was collected helped to inform both government and UNICEF programming.

In **Azerbaijan**, for example, three pieces of data collection were supported by UNICEF. The first was a United Nations Socioeconomic Assessment for COVID-19 (August 2020), for which UNICEF calculated the costs of COVID-19 for the education sector, and identified the short-, medium-, and long-term actions that should be taken. The second was a National Learning Assessment, which monitored the learning losses caused as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown. The third – led by UNICEF and the MoE in partnership with the REACH Initiative – was an Education in Emergencies Needs Assessment (April 2021), which reported on the education disruption caused both by COVID-19 and the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Similarly, in **Serbia** one of the first activities that the UNICEF CO conducted following school closures was a large-scale study of learning, particularly among vulnerable groups. This was a joint analysis by MoESTD and UNICEF of the status of vulnerable groups in regard to distance learning, conducted in May 2020. This analysis was a very important starting point in negotiating the Prevention of Digital Divide project (EU Instrument for Pre-accession Assistancefunded). The study highlighted the large digital divide that exists in Serbia. A further household survey collected data including the number of hours children are learning online, the perceptions of parents regarding children’s progress, as well as an RTA of the attitudes of students who are over 15 years old. Moreover, UNICEF Serbia is conducting U-reports periodically to collect the views of children and adolescents on distance learning

UNICEF **BiH** conducted two rounds of RNAs in April and then June which acted first as an initial step in mapping the needs for immediate action and support, and then as a way of gauging what had been achieved so far. UNICEF BiH then partnered with UNDP to conduct a social impact assessment of COVID-19, which included household surveys and interviews, in order to assess the vulnerabilities, risks, strengths, and coping strategies of people, households, and society. This included data regarding how families were coping with school closures.

UNICEF **Turkey**, as well as collecting data, aimed to be a repository for all available data. For example, it monitored how Turkey fared in terms of its ICT response, and the effect of COVID-19 on attendance. In this regard, UNICEF Turkey acted as an important interlocutor for donors who required data to justify their programming.

# Assessment of UNICEF’s education response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the usual evaluation and assessment cycle that underpins UNICEF’s education programming. For this reason, UNICEF decided to undertake an RTA in order to take stock of its response. This section presents a synthesised assessment of UNICEF’s regional education response to the COVID-19 pandemic in regard to three assessment themes: 1) effectiveness and relevance; 2) adaptability; and 3) equity and inclusion. It then draws on these themes to reflect on UNICEF’s successes, challenges, and lessons learned during the pandemic period. Country-specific assessments can be found in Annex C (Azerbaijan), Annex D (Turkey), Annex E (Serbia), and Annex F (BiH).

The analysis presented here looks at effectiveness, relevance, and adaptability in terms of processes implemented (were UNICEF’s activities implemented in ways that would lead to effective, relevant, and adaptable programming?) as well as – to the extent possible – achieving quantifiable indicators following the logic of ToC presented above. Further, the analysis relies on the subjective assessment of well-informed stakeholders of the effectiveness, relevance, and adaptability of COs’ education responses to COVID-19, and seeks to mitigate the subjectivity bias by triangulating across multiple sources.

## Effectiveness and relevance of UNICEF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic

**In the context of prevailing uncertainties caused by the pandemic, UNICEF COs succeeded in utilising pre-existing knowledge, funds, expertise, and partnerships to effectively contribute to the functioning and strengthening of the education sectors in the focus countries.**

The following table indicates UNICEF CO’s achievement of their targets in regard to their provision of educational access, the number of schools implementing safe school protocols and the number of teachers trained in delivering digital, distance, and blended learning, as reported in UNICEF ECAR’s Humanitarian Performance Monitoring (HPM) data (2021).

Table 5: UNICEF Country Office achievement of education targets in 2021

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Number of schools implementing safe school protocols (infection prevention and control) | | | Number of teachers trained in delivering digital, distance, and blended learning | | | **Number of** **children accessing formal or non-formal education, including early learning** | | |
| Country | 2021 Target | Total UNICEF Results | % Achieved | 2021 Target | Total UNICEF Results | % Achieved | 2021 Target | Total UNICEF Results | % Achieved |
| Azerbaijan | - | - | - | - | - | - | 155,000 | 13,500 | 9% |
| Serbia | - | - | - | 1,150 | 52,052 | 4526% | 880,000 | 872,373 | 99% |
| Turkey | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| BiH | - | - | - | 5,000 | 674 | 13% | 200,000 | 600 | 0% |
| ECAR (Total)[[12]](#footnote-13) | 17,566 | 3,071 | 17% | 140,959 | 164,458 | 117% | 7,317,644 | 2,739,288 | 37% |

Source: UNICEF, 2021 *ECAR SitRep\_Jan\_to\_June\_HPM detailed\_Analysis*, UNICEF ECAR

Table 6: UNICEF Country Office achievement of education targets in 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Number of schools implementing safe school protocols (infection prevention and control) | | | Number of teachers trained in delivering digital, distance, and blended learning | | | **Number of children accessing formal or non-formal education, including early learning** | | |
| Country | 2020 Target | Total UNICEF Results | % Achieved | 2020 Target | Total UNICEF Results | % Achieved | 2020 Target | Total UNICEF Results | % Achieved |
| Azerbaijan | 4 395 | 4,411 | 100% | 2,000 | - | 0% | - | - | - |
| Serbia | - | - | - | 40,000 | 45,524 | 114% | - | - | - |
| Turkey | - | - | - | 125 000 | 196 063 | 157% | - | - | - |
| BiH | - | - | - | 1,500 | 4,662 | 311% | - | - | - |
| ECAR (Total)[[13]](#footnote-14) | 30,499 | 51,374 |  | 246,330 | 322,477 | 131% | - | - | - |

*Source: UNICEF HPM Resource page and several sources listed on the page*

**HPM data sets have significant gaps.** In regard to the number of schools implementing safe school protocols, for example, none of the countries discussed in this report documented their targets or achievements in 2021, and only Azerbaijan documented their targets or achievements in 2020. The number of children accessing formal or non-formal education, including early learning is reported for three out of four study countries in 2021 but none of the four study countries in 2020. The number of teachers trained in delivering digital, distance, and blended learning is available for two out of four COs only in 2021, and for three out of four COs in 2020.

**There is significant variation in effectiveness – measured in terms of target achievement – among UNICEF COs and across different indicators.** As the HPM data indicate UNICEF Serbia far exceeded its target regarding the number of teachers trained in delivering digital, distance, and blended learning. In contrast, UNICEF BiH only met 13% of its target.

A number factors may be contributing to the differential target achievement rates. The Phase 1 RTA report documented the significant variation across COs in the definition of targets and UNICEF’s contribution to achieving them. For instance, in Serbia the target figure for total number of children accessing formal or non-formal education, including early learning, is set at 880,000 while in Azerbaijan the target is set at 155,000 – yet it is not clear whether the exact same target setting methodology was applied in the case of the two countries, in part because each CO relies on the data that are available in setting their targets. Furthermore, the modality on which interventions were planned (e.g. Online or in-person) shaped expectations of feasible targets, yet these modalities changed in line with the changing COVID-19 restrictions.

**At the same time, there are dramatic differences in the financial envelopes available to different COs, which also affects the achievement of targets.** For instance, Turkey’s budget dwarfs those of the other countries. Table 6, which summarizes transfers made by COs under UNICEF’s Harmonised Approach to Cash Transfers (HACT) to their implementing partners (government and civil society organisations) details these disparities. Even on per capita basis, the differences are stark with the Turkey CO spending USD 751 allocated per 1000 of population[[14]](#footnote-15) against USD 188 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, USD 54 in Serbia, and 23 in Azerbaijan in 2020 (see Figure 3).

Table 6: UNICEF Country Office Cash Transfers in USD

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Country | 2018 Total | 2019 Total | 2020 Total | 2021 Total |
| Azerbaijan | 110,799 | 133,834 | 229,069 | 229,595 |
| Serbia | 733,014 | 605,247 | 372,577 | 134,011 |
| Turkey | 68,621,428 | 82,009,205 | 63,375,367 | 39,551,114 |
| BiH | 122,351 | 477,277 | 604,825 | 366,561 |

Source: UNICEF, 2021 *EDU Countries\_HAC & HACT\_2018-2021*, UNICEF ECAR

Figure 3: HACT budget per 1000 of population

**Comparison of pre-pandemic and post-pandemic HACT expenditure shows a declining trend in Serbia and Turkey and a rapid increase in Azerbaijan and Bosnia and Herzegovina during 2020 at the height of the pandemic.** Figure 4 demonstrates change over time relative to the 2018 expenditure levels (setting the latter to 100). The expansion of HACT funding was especially rapid in Bosnia and Herzegovina, although it began just prior to the pandemic.

Figure 4: Change in HACT expenditures on education in 2018 – 2021 (HACT expenditure in 2018 is set to 100 for all countries)

**Due to variability in target setting across different COs, the HACT and HPM data cannot be analysed in relation to each other, thus making it extremely difficult to speak about cost effectiveness of HACT spending and its value-for-money in terms of results achieved.** Analysis of cost effectiveness would therefore require a separate exercise and should be conducted at the level of specific activities where the results are better defined and the link from UNICEF expenditures to outputs and outcomes are easier to trace.

**UNICEF’s ability to collect and analyse education data, at times within a month of the first lockdown, meant that it was quickly able to diagnose the situation and respond with relevant interventions.** These data meant that UNICEF COs were quickly able to develop plans. In particular, UNICEF used these data to advocate for education resources for the most vulnerable, and for the need to open schools as safely and as quickly as possible. In some instances – for example, the National Learning Assessment in Azerbaijan – data were used to identify schools and districts which required direct support.

**UNICEF COs were able to draw on international best practices provided by the regional office and UNICEF Headquarters to provide quick responses.** This enabled COs to provide guidance to MoEs at rapid speed, and at times COs collaborated with each other to translate necessary materials. Government partners frequently used these guidance measures as the basis for their own protocols. However, not all guidance was relevant to all countries. For example, guidance on school meal provision during school lockdowns was not relevant to Azerbaijan as meals are not typically provided in Azerbaijani schools.

**Government partners interviewed as part of this assignment were overwhelmingly positive about the effectiveness and relevance of UNICEF’s contribution to education during the COVID-19 pandemic.** They saw UNICEF as being an invaluable partner that was both able to address government shortcomings and influence government policy in an evidence-based manner. Key to this effectiveness was UNICEF’s long presence in each country, its commitment to not politicising education decision-making, and its responsiveness to government needs. Strong bonds of trust developed over the course of the pandemic between UNICEF COs and government partners.

**Several UNICEF COs had prioritised digital learning prior to the pandemic, giving them an advantage throughout COVID-19.** UNICEF Serbia, for example, already had some experience in establishing digital networks and online training. For example, the CO had previously organised a trip for the MoE to Brussels where there was a conference about online learning four months before the pandemic. It had been involved in an EU pilot project, ‘SELFIE’, which is a tool that schools can use to assess where they stand with learning in the digital age. UNICEF Serbia had also earlier provided support for the establishment of the national learning platform for educators within the national Institute for Improvement of Education. While this started as a very modest platform in 2018, with just three self-paced learning trainings, by 2019 this open-source e-learning platform was used by 36,500 teachers for training purposes, and in 2020, when all teacher training went through this platform as a result of COVID-19, it was used by 52,540 teachers, being a main channel for the professional development of teachers during the pandemic ([ЗУОВ Еду – Платформа за спровођење обука од јавног интереса (zuov.gov.rs)](https://obuke.zuov.gov.rs/)). UNICEF Serbia had furthermore supported the establishment of a PIR portal – a learning community of psychologists and pedagogists with material resources – which has so far received 20,179 views. Turkey similarly established EBA as an education platform, originally designed to host learning materials, which was transformed to become an interactive learning site during the pandemic.

**Teacher training could be effective and relevant.** This was evidenced in KIIs by the large number of teachers who participated in online training throughout the pandemic, at times almost doubling the number of teachers UNICEF COs intended to reach. Teachers reported that they found online training to be very helpful, although an evidence base for how teachers have implemented changes in their classrooms is not available. The cost-effectiveness of online training was also mentioned by KIIs as an unintentional added bonus. UNICEF COs supported these teacher training initiatives with financial and technical assistance.

**Many of UNICEF’s interventions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic will likely have a long-lasting impact.** An extensive amount of teacher training and online teaching experience has been conducted during this period. According to anecdotal data, thishas left a generation of teachers with much improved digital competencies and confidence (however more evaluation is required). Schools and homes that previously did not have access to devices and internet connectivity are now benefiting from long-term plans relating to digital inclusion. EBA centres and EdTech libraries will continue to be available to vulnerable children even after the pandemic ends.

**Many UNICEF COs were very effective in attracting funding from partners and donors for education, which allowed for more ambitious projects.** UNICEF Serbia, for example, exceeded its fundraising goals for 2020 by 100%. Furthermore, it received more than EUR 2.5 million from the EU for technical assistance for the government to bridge the digital divide for the most vulnerable children. With these funds UNICEF Serbia is able to implement ambitious projects at the national level, school level, and student level. Similarly, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) forewent their partnerships with NGOs in BiH to instead invite UNICEF to be its partner of choice. This USAID funding was the catalyst for work on a programme of activities with all 14 MoEs in BiH.

**The effectiveness of some COVID-19 response plans was sometimes undermined by other COVID-19 mitigation measures.** For example, EBA centres in Turkey were poorly attended in part due to social distancing measures which prevented children leaving their homes at certain times of the day. Similarly, UNICEF COs struggled to on-board new employees while working from home.

**Setting targets and tracking progress has proved difficult during the pandemic, meaning that the effectiveness of some interventions is still unknown.** The effectiveness and relevance of many interventions currently relies on anecdotal evidence, or the extent to which services were engaged with. There is so far little evidence available on how UNICEF interventions have effectively promoted learning or wellbeing. These evaluations are being planned, but the rapid changes associated with the pandemic mean that the full effectiveness of many of these interventions will likely not be known.

## Adaptability of UNICEF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic

**UNICEF COs demonstrated an impressive ability to adapt and respond to the changing needs of education stakeholders throughout COVID-19.** KIIs in all four countries identified UNICEF’s adaptability as being one of its greatest strengths, and compared UNICEF favourably to other organisations.

**Having a plan made it easier to adapt the plan.** The programming strategies that many UNICEF COs had developed before COVID-19 proved helpful, even though they needed to be substantially changed. According to KIIs with UNICEF COS, the written strategy built unity of vision and coherence among teams, and became a touchstone in making decisions in response to the pandemic, in light of new data that were being collected. Strong strategies also helped UNICEF COs to understand how emergency planning might contribute to long-term planning.

**Some UNICEF COs – though not all – had developed significant experience in responding to emergencies, and this contributed to their abilities to adapt.** The Syrian migrant crisis, for example – although different in its nature to COVID-19 – was noted by several KIIs as being a good learning experience for their COs. This reserve of institutional experience meant that UNICEF COs did not panic when faced with the challenges relating to COVID-19, and had institutional resources to draw upon: for example, templates for data collection to understand the scale and impact of the crisis.

**Emergency practice planning was helpful in responding to COVID-19.** For example, UNICEF Azerbaijan noted that the emergency response plan exercises which they had practised in 2019 – a year before the pandemic – meant that the staff immediately knew what to do and were clear about what they could contribute when the pandemic began.

**UNICEF COs that had large partner networks were able to adapt quickly through the mobilisation of those networks.** Partners such as research institutes, private organisations, and universities, for example, were able to assist with rapid data collection and analysis. NGOs were able to act as delivery partners. Professional associations were able to advise on the content of learning materials and trainings. UNICEF’s position as a trusted and credible partner, with long-term experience in-country, significantly assisted the mobilisation efforts, as did the solidarity experienced at the beginning of the pandemic, which was important for sector unity and support to governments.

**UNICEF COs were able to draw upon in-house expertise, which helped increase their adaptability.** In particular, COs that had in-house expertise in monitoring and evaluation, and data collection and analysis, were able to develop rapid assessments of COVID-19’s impact on education. Smaller COs, which did not have a breadth of in-house expertise, needed to contract consultants to carry out this work, thus making them less adaptable.

**UNICEF funding was easily adaptable, which enabled COs to respond before many other partners.** COs drew on thematic funds, which arrived within two weeks of lockdowns. This allowed COs to implement plans while they waited for donors to make contributions. This was an important advantage over MoEs, which typically plan budgets a year in advance and were therefore not as financially flexible. In Serbia, for example, UNICEF was able to finance digital licences which the government could not fund due to administrative roadblocks. These licences were required for recording a television curriculum that was coupled with distance learning in the first months of the pandemic, and for the provision of appropriate speech to text software for transcription of television classes so that they could be accessible for children with hearing impairment.

**UNICEF supported its partners to adapt to COVID-19 by quickly responding to their requests for programme adaptation.** A delivery partner funded by UNICEF Turkey, for example, was quickly given permission to adapt their programme to an online setting, and a budget line was added to support hygiene product distribution to schools.

**At times UNICEF partners struggled to understand UNICEF’s approach to adaptable programming.** For example, UNICEF’s approach to using data to programme future activities, and engaging multiple stakeholders in programme decision-making, meant that the outcomes that were desired at the end of the project were not always stated at the beginning of the project, since it was assumed that the desired outcomes would change according to new data. While important in a rapidly changing situation, this left some partners feeling disoriented.

## Equity and inclusion relating to UNICEF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic

**Data collection was an essential aspect of advocating for the needs of vulnerable children.** In particular, data collection made it possible to identify the digital divide, with low-income children identified as being the most vulnerable in this regard. This justified a focus on making online education accessible to all, and helped UNICEF leverage donor funding for this purpose. It also helped UNICEF to identify regions and schools which could not access online education, and to develop targeted programming.

**However, identifying vulnerable children in a context where children are not physically attending school is difficult.** For example, UNICEF COs reported difficulties in measuring drop-out rates based on traditional drop-out rate calculation methodologies. In Turkey the government suspended the collection of enrolment data during the school lockdowns. Assessment of learning was also suspended or adjusted in some countries, making disparities in learning outcomes difficult to measure.

**Key informants reported that a specific gender response was not considered necessary by any of the UNICEF COs until very recently.** All key informants noted that the data indicated that there was no gender gap in regard to learning outcomes in their countries, and therefore no COs had developed gender-sensitive nor gender-responsive programming. However, preliminary data from Azerbaijan suggested that girls’ enrolment was negatively affected by COVID-19: prior to COVID-19, 98% of girls between the ages of 10 and 14 attended school regularly; however, in the 2020/21 school year, the enrolment of girls aged 15–17 dropped to 89% (UNICEF (2021b) ‘Azerbaijan Education in Emergencies Needs Assessment’).

. One key informant expressed concern that girls in rural areas might be engaging in learning less than their male peers during the lockdown, due to the pressure to perform household chores while at home. Data on national-level learning losses and school attendance are still scarce but the gender disparity may become more pronounced in the years after COVID-19. Key informants similarly noted the gender dimension in regard to teachers, the majority of whom are female, and who were required to teach online while performing household chores and childcare. The mental health strain on female teachers may be an area that requires further attention, with UNICEF BiH now starting a programme of psychosocial support with a focus on female teachers. The psychosocial support programmes for teachers already developed by many UNICEF COs have been well received.

**UNICEF’s extensive experience in working with refugee children was an advantage when responding to their educational needs throughout COVID-19.** For example, many UNICEF COs worked with delivery partners who worked directly with refugees and children on the move. These delivery partners were in a strong position to distribute hygiene kits and learning kits, and to facilitate online education. Children who live in refugee camps and housing were easy to reach by UNICEF and their delivery partners. In BiH, for example, the collective accommodation that many refugee children occupy was conducive to non-formal education opportunities like language learning, which was not available to the majority of the population. In Serbia, UNICEF established EdTech libraries in refugee camps, and also provided digital devices, equipment, and strengthened internet access. University student volunteers provided online English language courses for children on the move, while teachers were engaged to provide additional learning support. In Turkey, UNICEF’s familiarity with refugee settlements enabled it to establish EBA centres in locations that would best serve refugee children. However, the focus on Syrian refugees often came at the expense of refugees from other language groups, for whom resources were not available.

**Data indicate that Roma children were much less likely to have access to digital devices required for online learning.** In BiH, for example, the Phase 2 RNA indicated that at least 6% of the total number of children without access to online learning were Roma, despite only 1.7% of BiH’s population being Roma (UNICEF Programme Proposal, 2020). Later, a household survey, also in BiH, indicated that among the members of vulnerable groups members of the Roma community (13.2%) and the relatively poor (20%) attended the least number of online classes (UNICEF/UNDP, 2021). UNICEF Serbia’s data collection similarly identified 30 primary schools which had a large Roma population that could not connect online. These data justified UNICEF’s direct support for these 30 schools, each of which received 43 tablet computers and two laptops, while all teachers received training for digital competence, remote and online teaching, and psychosocial support. Without this support, these schools would not be able to connect online. All 30 schools will also receive EUR 5,000 each to organise homework clubs.

**Children with disabilities were the hardest to reach and the last to benefit from UNICEF’s education response to COVID-19.** Although in some countries schools for children with disabilities were kept open throughout the lockdowns, evidence suggests that some parents chose to keep their children at home. Equally, children with disabilities who attended mainstream schools or special schools were often left without specialised support when learning from home. UNICEF struggled to collect data on children with disabilities, although many key informants anticipated that children with disabilities were less able to access online learning. UNICEF Turkey has only recently conducted a needs analysis to understand how children with disabilities can benefit from distance education. UNICEF BiH is now piloting an assistive technology project, which is a package of devices and support for schools which aims to increase inclusive education, particularly for children with disabilities. Although efforts have been made across the region to train teachers to work with children with disabilities remotely, at the time that data for this report was collected there had been little direct attempt to support these children.

## Sector coordination

**Different COs had different roles in education sector coordination.** UNICEF Turkey, for example, organised a sector group meeting every six weeks, thus creating a platform where opportunities and information could be shared. In contrast, UNICEF Azerbaijan did not identify many education stakeholders that it could work with, other than the government. Its role was therefore not one of partner coordination but rather of sourcing necessary expertise to support government and UNICEF initiatives. In Serbia, government key informants rejected the notion that UNICEF was engaged in partner coordination, which reflects the fact that MoESTD was leading the COVID-19 response, and not UNICEF. Rather, key informants described UNICEF Serbia as a ‘connective tissue, connecting all stakeholders’, and as ‘a glue that brought some pieces together’.

**UNICEF has strong expertise in sourcing necessary expertise.** UNICEF’s networks and exemplary reputation meant that it was able to recruit expertise and support from a range of organisations – including universities, CSOs, think tanks – when developing programming and interventions.

**UNICEF was often important in communicating information to a variety of stakeholders.** This was particularly necessary given the centralised nature of governments in ECAR, to enhance timely information to the municipal or CSO level

**UNICEF had a good oversight of the education sector, which enhanced coordination.** The Serbian MoESTD key informant suggested that ‘UNICEF maybe had the best insight into this situation’, since the MoESTD itself had systematic limitations that meant it could not consider every aspect. UNICEF could identify where there was a ‘missing link’ or a gap that needed to be bridged. For example, the fact that UNICEF worked in multiple sectors and with multiple stakeholders meant that it could introduce relevant stakeholders to each other.

## Challenges relating to UNICEF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic

**The COVID-19 pandemic was a new type of emergency, and UNICEF COs struggled to gauge whether it would be a ‘marathon’ or a ‘sprint’.** For example, COs found it difficult to assess how much they should be investing in long-term solutions to lockdowns – such as developing new digital standards and pedagogies – as opposed to short-term needs such as the distribution of digital devices. COs acknowledged that they may have acted differently had they understood the longevity of the pandemic. The structural changes that COVID-19 has brought about in societies and education systems suggests that new forms of emergency response, and improved forms of education response (with more focus on digital and blended learning), may need to be developed.

**Traditional forms of data collection and assessment proved challenging when children were not physically in school.** For example, UNICEF was able to collect data on the types of learning materials that children were receiving; however, it was not able to assess how children were engaging with those materials. School-based assessments were difficult to undertake given that the schools also did not always understand the situation of their students. Household surveys and messaging tools such as U-reports, which gather real-time data, were therefore important. Yet the overall lack of data on learning outcomes and losses made planning remedial learning difficult.

**The reliance on enrolment data as a measurement of gender equality contributed to the fact that gender sensitive and gender responsive programming was not prioritized.** Particularly at the primary and lower-secondary school level there is gender parity in regard to enrolment. However it is possible that extended school closures will exacerbate pre-existing challenges such as gender-based violence and early marriage. UNICEF COs have to date not developed programming which anticipates these challenges.

**UNICEF COs faced challenges when trying to monitor and evaluate the impact of their interventions.** In part, this was due to the long-term nature of many of these interventions. Psychosocial support programmes, for example, may take months if not years to take effect. However, a more difficult challenge was the inability of UNICEF to observe schools or learning due to social distancing measures, and the lack of data relating to learning outcomes or school attendance. This meant that UNICEF struggled to satisfy the requests of donors who wished to see the impact of their funding, or to evaluate for their own purposes how to adjust their programming.

**UNICEF COs themselves struggled with mental health issues, such as stress and burn-out, during this period.** Many UNICEF staff were working from home while also home-schooling children who were not in school. Key informants reported that UNICEF staff members were available ‘24/7’ and worked throughout the night in the early stages of the lockdown. For new staff members, on-boarding was also a challenge given the lack of face-to-face contact with their managers or colleagues. During this time human resources were further stretched by staff members falling sick.

**Government structures – either highly centralised or highly decentralised – and the frequent replacement of government partners in some countries at times made decision-making difficult.** Government partners, for example, were not always able to work flexibly or dynamically during this period, and changing staff meant that new updates were required.

**The absence of standards relating to digital education and pedagogy made it difficult to develop teacher training materials.** Similarly, UNICEF COs found that digital devices that were not optimal for learning were being donated to schools or procured by governments. This led to ineffective spending and under-utilisation of devices.

## Lessons learned from UNICEF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic

**Strong partnerships with governments and other stakeholders help to ensure a fast quality response when emergencies arise.** The time and effort that was invested in these partnerships before COVID-19 meant that there was a store of trust and good-will when lockdowns occurred. This enabled a smooth engagement with governments, who were able to communicate what they needed, thus ensuring the relevance of UNICEF’s programming. It furthermore meant that governments were responsive to UNICEF’s advocacy in relation to supporting vulnerable children. In countries where the UNICEF CO struggles to leverage strong partnerships with stakeholders, work might be done to understand how to strengthen these partnerships.

**Different UNICEF COs have different country contexts and this has implications for how they respond to emergencies (e.g. Since the Syria crisis, the Turkey CO has been a humanitarian actor in the country with existing coordination mechanism), with COs that engage in direct provision of education-related services able to mount a faster tangible response on the ground.** UNICEF BiH, for example, understands its role as predominantly being to support education systems, while other COs also have large projects that directly support children and teachers. The tension between system-level support and direct support may arise during emergencies such as COVID-19, where the scale and duration of the impact is unknown.

**Pre-existing inequities in the system and significant disparities in the vulnerable population’s needs** **prior to a crisis need to be taken into account when planning for crises**. This could prevent the further exacerbation of inequalities among children, with the greatest effect on the most vulnerable such as children with disabilities. A prior awareness will also require a more disaggregated analysis to better document, understand, and track the needs of the most vulnerable.

**The pre-existing crisis preparedness – for example, emergency response plans and existing coordination mechanisms - makes a huge difference when a national wide crisis hits**. The Turkey CO is a good example of this. The mechanisms that they had in place prior to the pandemic made it easier and faster to activate the CO’s response. Similarly, KIIs from the Azerbaijan CO noted that their emergency preparation exercises in 2019 were very helpful in regard to their response to COVID-19 in 2020.

**Strategic investments in systems and technologies that have a crisis-responsive potential have paid off in several countries; UNICEF has a role to play in identifying and putting in place such crisis-response appropriate systems and technologies in order to build country capacity for responding to future crises.** Both UNICEF Serbia and UNICEF Turkey had already started investing in digital education and training before the COVID-19 pandemic. When lockdowns occurred, Turkey had an online learning platform that was able to be quickly adapted for distance learning. Thanks in part to UNICEF, Serbia’s MoESTD staff had attended workshops relating to digital education. Furthermore, a digital component had been infused into national trainings of the implementation of the new curriculum that was funded by the EU, meaning that the teacher training that was already scheduled could be made more relevant for teachers. While COVID-19 could not have been predicted, UNICEF’s ability to anticipate future needs and trends in education helped to strengthen national education systems during the emergency. UNICEF should consider future needs and trends after COVID-19. This might mean, for example, considering the implications of climate change for national education systems.

**Some degree of digital education – alongside face-to-face learning – is here to stay, and standards and training need to keep up with the pace of change.** Training and infrastructure development to support digital education suggests that pedagogy will be changed in the long-term. This long-term change should be embraced; however, standards relating to digital devices and online learning need to be developed, as do examples of best practice. Furthermore, digital education – and what this implies for pedagogy – should be incorporated into mainstream teacher education programmes, as well as in strategic documents for the development of education by governments and UNICEF.

**Psychosocial support and training are important for teachers and is increasingly recognised as important by government partners.** This was evidenced by the large number of teachers who voluntarily took part in psychosocial support training throughout the lockdown period. These programmes require evaluation and development and should be seen as a way to build cultures of emotional resiliency within the schooling system in preparation for future emergencies.

**Remedial learning may need to be planned, even without strong evidence demonstrating learning loss during this period.** It is widely anticipated that student learning outcomes will be severely diminished due to school closures and interruptions, and that children from low-income households will suffer the greatest reduction in learning outcomes. In this regard UNICEF ECAR may need to draw on studies from other countries which do have data on learning loss, in order to start anticipating the kinds of remedial learning that students will require in the coming years.

**Teachers attend training when it is online, perhaps even more readily than when it is face-to-face.** The effectiveness of the online modality for teacher training still needs to be evaluated; however, developing online platforms for continuing professional development (CPD) may result in significant financial savings in the long term. There is a need to note the challenges of online professional development. Namely online-only professional development may exclude teachers from the most marginalized communities, who do not have access to digital devices.

## Country-level observations

The following are key observations at the CO level:

### Azerbaijan

* A strong history of cooperation and a good level of mutual trust between UNICEF and the IOE significantly enhanced the effectiveness of UNICEF’s contribution, despite having only one member in its education team.
* The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between 27 September and 10 November meant that the CO was responding to two emergencies at the same time, and this placed a large strain on human resources.
* The last education-related emergency that the CO had operated in was over 20 years ago, and as such the CO felt inexperienced in dealing with the COVID-19 emergency[[15]](#footnote-16).
* The fast development of guidelines for online learning was a good example of how COs draw upon the international experience collated by UNICEF Headquarters.
* The psychosocial support training originally developed for teachers experiencing conflict was also found to be very useful as a response to the trauma caused by COVID-19.
* The widespread introduction of socio-emotional learning into teacher preparation is an excellent example of some of the positive long-term impacts of UNICEF’s response to COVID-19.
* UNICEF was able to effectively use data collected in collaboration with the IOE and the MoE to develop programmes which addressed the needs of vulnerable children.
* UNICEF struggled to encourage the MoE to be more proactive in conducting its own analysis and making its own data-driven decisions.
* The CO recognises the need to identify and invest in other education partners with whom it can collaborate, as the availability of other partners would reduce UNICEF’s dependence on the MoE.
* Ultimately, the CO felt that its interventions during COVID-19 served to ‘provide some spare parts for the system to function, rather than really rebuilding the system’, in part due to the lack of human resources. In this regard it did not feel that its response to COVID-19 was transformative with respect to the education system.

### Turkey

* The CO’s experience in working with refugee populations was a huge advantage when supporting the education of refugee children during the pandemic.
* Online teacher education was very successful in Turkey, attracting almost twice the number of teachers expected and at a reduced cost.
* EBA centres were an innovative approach to making online education accessible; however, they failed to attract the number of children hoped for.
* The COVID-19 pandemic has normalised a focus on psychosocial support in an otherwise ‘traditional’ countries.
* UNICEF distributed learner toolkits to more than 75,000 refugee and vulnerable children who may not have had access to EBA. These toolkits contained stationery, books, and hygiene materials.
* Interventions designed to support children with disabilities are forthcoming, but they will be available late in the COVID-19 pandemic. This should have been considered much earlier.
* UNICEF’s messaging for parents in Turkish and Arabic was helpful in informing many refugee families of when their children should return to school; however, it did not accommodate the linguistic needs of those families whose home language is not Arabic.
* UNICEF is aware of the learning loss experienced in the early years, and it is starting to train teachers to teach basic literacy and numeracy in hybrid settings.
* The development of digital skills will be particularly important for Turkey, given its very young population.
* UNICEF’s role as a repository of data was helpful for donors, who often struggle to access data from MoNE.
* UNICEF partners struggled with the short-term programming contracts offered by UNICEF, which meant that they could not hire or retain the best staff.

### Serbia

* Based on monitoring reports on distance learning prepared by MoESTD, UNICEF, and academic institutions (May 2020), UNICEF established a partnership with the EU aimed at strengthening the resilience of the education system and further development of the national learning management system, development of digital resources, and prevention of a digital divide through the establishment of EdTech labs and learning clubs in the most deprived areas.
* Serbia UNICEF’s professional relationship with the MoESTD enabled UNICEF’s partnership with the EU, which in turn gave it a head start in terms of thinking about digital education.
* Serbia’s previous work on digitalisation in education, in particular on the establishment of the National Teacher Portal, was vital for supporting distance education and all teacher training conducted by the MoESTD since the beginning of the pandemic.
* Serbia very successfully leveraged data on the digital divide to attract large amounts of funding from the EU and other donors.
* Serbia was very successful in terms of private fundraising and this is a sign of the trust that private companies and individuals place in UNICEF.
* According to UNICEF, as a result of its support Serbia was very successful in regard to the inclusion of children on the move in the mainstream education system, including during the pandemic.
* UNICEF was involved in negotiating public–private partnerships between internet providers and the government, in order to ensure that children had access to online education.
* UNICEF’s efforts to develop standards for digital devices (e.g. concept notes regarding Education Technology Libraries) and digital pedagogies may prove useful for other COs in the region.
* UNICEF’s ability to ‘step in’ when the MoESTD could not quickly purchase software licences is an excellent example of UNICEF’s in-country value.
* EdTech libraries were an innovative idea to increase access to online education, and their piloting in vulnerable communities served both those vulnerable communities in the short-term and the strengthening of the EdTech library project in the long-term.
* Serbia was successful in establishing different professional online learning communities (horizontal exchanges) during the COVID 19 pandemic.

### BiH

*The ability to conduct only one KII with BiH stakeholders is a limitation to the specific BiH-related findings in this report.*

* UNICEF BiH foregrounded its role in systems support, rather than direct provision.
* In-house expertise helped UNICEF act quickly when collecting and analysing data.
* The decentralised education system in BiH meant that not all cantons developed online learning platforms. Many teachers and students therefore did not use any online platform, instead relying on simple communication tools such as Viber and WhatsApp.
* BiH attracted large amounts of funding for education, and cooperated with the private sector to enable internet access.
* The need to provide country-level data to UNICEF Headquarters stretched human resources and took time away from other activities.
* Learning from the pandemic period is already being used to support continuity of learning, for example through an assistive technology project which targets mainstream schools that include children with disabilities.

## Summary of findings

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Assessment questions | Summary answers |
| How effective and relevant was UNICEF’s work in supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic? | According to KIIs UNICEF’s work was considered extremely effective in supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Government partners were overwhelmingly positive about the effectiveness and relevance of UNICEF’s contribution, particularly in regard to teacher training and continuity of learning. COs’ ability to collect and analyse education data, at times within a month of the first lockdowns, meant that UNICEF was able to quickly diagnose the situation and respond with relevant interventions. KIIs believed that effectiveness was enhanced through COs’ ability to draw on international best practices provided by the regional office and UNICEF Headquarters. However, not all best practices were relevant to all countries. The large donations that UNICEF was able to mobilise during this period enhanced the effectiveness of its work and were due to trust in UNICEF and UNICEF’s previous record with governments and the public. Given the lack of systematic evaluation, and the underreporting in the HPM databases, it is difficult to ascertain objectively the effectiveness of UNICEF’s work during this period. |
| To what extent did UNICEF’s work support equity and inclusion in education during the COVID-19 pandemic? | The extent to which UNICEF’s work supported equity and inclusion in education during the COVID-19 pandemic is mixed. On the one hand, UNICEF’s rapid data collection was an essential aspect of advocating for the needs of vulnerable children, particularly Roma children. It is likely that UNICEF’s support to the government helped to prioritize vulnerable children. Furthermore, UNICEF’s extensive experience in working with refugee children was an advantage, since UNICEF has strong relationships with delivery partners who worked directly with refugees and children on the move enabling UNICEF interventions to reach these populations. However, the methodological challenges of assessing the situation of children with disabilities meant that these children were largely missed throughout the school closures. Only recently has UNICEF programming been developed to support the education of children with disabilities. Similarly, gender parity in school enrolment prior to the pandemic was often cited as a reason why COs chose not to develop gender-responsive programming. |
| How adaptable was UNICEF’s work in supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic? | Key informants reported adaptability as UNICEF’s greatest strength during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many COs had significant experience in responding to emergencies and this contributed to their ability to adapt, ensuring that all staff members knew what to do. Thematic funds were also made available to COs within two weeks of the school closures, which meant that UNICEF could respond before many other partners were able to do so. This proved a particular advantage when supporting MoEs, whose budgets were much less flexible. Large partner networks were important for adaptability, as UNICEF was able to draw on its expertise at short notice, both for programme design and delivery. |
| What successes were there in UNICEF’s work in supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic? | UNICEF had several successes in its work supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic. All COs noted that their relationship with governments and other stakeholders had strengthened due to the intensity of the work, and that this further established UNICEF as an important partner in the region. UNICEF was particularly valued for their ability to respond dynamically by making resources available at short notice. The teacher training programming – designed to support teachers in digital competencies and digital pedagogies – was particularly successful in terms of reaching teachers with little experience of online learning, with many more teachers being reached than initially expected, and in a cost-effective way. The mainstreaming of psychosocial support for both teachers and families was an important success that will likely have a long-term impact. Lastly, UNICEF Serbia and UNICEF Turkey’s decision to support digital learning prior to COVID-19 demonstrates the success of UNICEF’s ability to prepare for future educational trends. |
| What challenges arose in UNICEF’s work in supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic? | Several challenges arose in UNICEF’s work in supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 lockdowns were a new type of emergency that UNICEF (and indeed the world) had not prepared for. UNICEF COs struggled to conceptualize the various possible school-closure trajectories, and therefore decisions were often torn between short-term needs and long-term structural solutions. The nature of the school closures meant that COs also struggled to collect data and conduct student assessments when children were not physically in school. The inability to assess how children were learning or engaging with materials meant that it was challenging for UNICEF COs to monitor and evaluate the impact of their interventions, especially since monitoring and evaluation was not a priority when the pandemic started. The lack of MEL also contributed to difficulties when engaging donors who requested evidence of their impact. The absence of standards relating to digital education and pedagogy made it difficult to develop teacher training materials, or to make decisions regarding device procurement. |
| What suggestions for improvement arise from UNICEF’s work in supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic? | Several areas of improvement can be identified based on UNICEF’s work in supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first is the need to develop methodological approaches to assessing learning and learning behaviour when children are not physically attending school. The second is the need to develop standards for digital learning for both teachers and students, in order to support teacher training and device procurement programming. The third is the need for UNICEF to consciously develop partnerships and the capacity of partners, so that a strong stakeholder network is in place and is prepared for future emergencies. |

# Conclusions and moving forward

This assessment has shown that the UNICEF COs’ contribution to the national education systems in the selected four countries in ECAR during the pandemic was valuable. COs were not only able to ‘fill gaps’ that other stakeholders could not address, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, they were also able to use existing data collection strategies to support mid-term and then long-term programming in education. Their interventions succeeded in making online learning accessible to some of the most vulnerable children in the region with less progress for children with disabilities and girls, and in supporting teachers as they adapted to their new realities.

While the COVID-19 pandemic was a new type of emergency, COs were responsive in their anticipation of the general impact of the pandemic on children, teachers, and parents. This enabled clear strategies to be developed, which in many cases attracted significant donor support. Government and stakeholder relationships were strengthened during this time, in large part due to UNICEF’s responsiveness and commitment to national needs. Training and experience in emergency responses also served UNICEF COs well, with key informants reporting that UNICEF immediately knew what to do when the pandemic broke out.

Throughout the pandemic, UNICEF aimed to prioritize programming for vulnerable children, which COs identified as Roma, refugees, children with disabilities, and children from low-income families. The pandemic affected the extent to which UNICEF could reach these groups, both in terms of data collection and programme implementation. Refugee children who live in camps, for example, were relatively easy to provide services to, in contrast to children with disabilities. CO staff who were interviewed expressed an understanding of gender equality that was equivalent with gender parity in education enrolment. They cited this as the reason for a lack of gender-specific programming in the COVID-19 response. More thorough consideration of gender-based inequalities in the region and how they play out in emergency situations may be needed to conceptualize programming to be responsive to the differing needs of girls and boys in emergency contexts such as the pandemic. However, some evidence now suggests that adolescent girls’ enrolment rates have dropped as a result of school closures, and this may need to be addressed.

Challenges arose in terms of evaluating the impact of UNICEF’s interventions, as well as understanding the learning experiences of the most vulnerable children – particularly children with disabilities. **The extent of the learning impact of COVID-19 in ECAR is largely unknown; however, it has likely increased learning inequalities. This will be a key challenge in the coming years, for which UNICEF is only now beginning to prepare.**  UNICEF is uniquely positioned because of its strengthened partnerships with governments throughout this crisis and its expertise in data for children to improve the availability, quality and use of data, especially on the most marginalized children. This is relevant both immediately following the pandemic and in the long-term. UNICEF may support governments by tapping into its international expertise and experience to not only assess the impact of COVID-19 but also to improve processes for collecting and acting on data in future crises."

Moving forward this report identified two time-sensitive opportunities that have not received sufficient focus during the pandemic, but which should become a priority over the coming months and years. The first is providing remedial learning, particularly to children who were not able to access quality education throughout the pandemic. It is likely that the learning deficit among vulnerable children will be vast. Innovative approaches to teacher training – both in regard to the mode of delivery and the content - and assessing learning gaps will be required. It is also likely that UNICEF will be able to respond in an increasingly effective way to this need, given its growing body of knowledge and available support, such as guidance and standards, for remedial learning

The second time-sensitive opportunity is school re-engagement. It is likely that school engagement among vulnerable children and adolescent girls will have reduced over the course of the school closures. A holistic approach will be required that works with families and community leaders to ensure that children who may be at risk of child protection issues are welcomed back into full-time education.

The following successes, challenges, and recommendations summarise the key findings from this RTA.

## Successes

* **UNICEF was able to respond very quickly to the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic.** UNICEF quickly collected data which helped to understand the impact of COVID-19 on children, schools, and teachers. Combined with the ability to access thematic funds quickly, their prior experience in emergency responses, and their ability to draw on guidance from the UNICEF regional office and Headquarters, UNICEF COs were considered by many key informants to be first responders in this crisis context.
* **UNICEF drew on its strong relationships with government partners to ensure relevant responses.** These relationships were built during UNICEF’s long-term presence and based on its willingness to not politicise education decision-making. Government partners particularly appreciated that UNICEF considered their needs while developing their programmes. The trust that existed between UNICEF and government partners prior to COVID-19 meant that they were able to work very effectively together during this crisis. Furthermore, the crisis strengthened inter-personal working relationships.
* **UNICEF’s data collection strategies helped it to advocate effectively for the needs of the most vulnerable.** This was particularly important given the fact that few other partners were able to collect such comprehensive data. This data were effectively used to demonstrate the needs of vulnerable children, as well as the inequities in learning opportunities.
* **UNICEF successfully advocated for the importance of psychosocial support for teachers and students.** Psychosocial support had not previously been highly valued, particularly in ‘traditional’ countries. However, the stresses placed on teachers and families during this time, combined with the anecdotal success of UNICEF’s psychosocial support trainings, has meant that psychosocial support training may become a mainstream aspect of initial teacher education and CPD.
* **UNICEF was able to attract and leverage large amounts of donor support.** Donors responded well to the data collected by UNICEF which evidenced specific needs, as well as UNICEF’s status as a trusted and long-standing partner in the region. Some COs doubled their fundraising goals during the pandemic, allowing them to embark on wide-reaching and ambitious projects.
* **Teacher training was effective, relevant, and cost-efficient.** Large numbers of teachers participated in online training and reported high satisfaction levels with that training.The cost-effectiveness of the online modality means that online teacher training may become a mainstream modality of CPD.
* **Many of UNICEF’s interventions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic will likely have a long-lasting impact.** The extensive amount of teacher training that has been conducted during this period has left a generation of teachers with much improved digital competencies and confidence. Schools and homes that previously did not have access to devices and internet connectivity are now benefiting from long-term plans relating to digital inclusion. EBA centres and EdTech libraries will continue to be available to vulnerable children even after the pandemic ends.

## Challenges

* **UNICEF struggled with the long-term nature of the crisis.** This affected the effectiveness of UNICEF’s programming since it was unclear to what extent it should respond to the immediate crisis or put systems in place to support digital learning in the long-term.
* **UNICEF struggled to monitor and evaluate the impact of its programming.** The difficulty of assessing learning outcomes or habits when students were not in school, or the impact of training for teachers working from home, meant that UNICEF could not monitor the impact of its interventions. This was difficult not only for UNICEF’s development of future interventions, but also for its communications with donors who were interested in impact.
* **The responsiveness of UNICEF's support for children with disabilities was impeded by a lack of data on their needs**. While interventions were developed late and effectiveness remains unknown, the information acquired on these children's needs in the recent period should be carefully documented and shared to inform future crises and to avoid this knowledge and experience being lost**.** As a result, interventions designed to support children with disabilities were developed very late, and the effectiveness of these interventions is still unknown.
* **UNICEF did not adopt standards relating to digital education and pedagogy, which made it difficult to develop teacher training materials.** Similarly, UNICEF COs found that digital devices that were not optimal for learning were being donated to schools or procured by governments. This led to ineffective spending and under-utilisation of devices.
* **UNICEF COs themselves struggled with mental health issues, such as stress and burn-out during this period.** Many UNICEF staff were working from home while also home-schooling children who were not in school. Several staff were unable to work due to having caught COVID-19.

## Recommendations for strengthening UNICEF’s education response (ECA Regional Office).

Below is the list of priority recommendations addressed to the ECA education team. We deliberately focus on the Regional Office recommendations in this section given that RTA was designed to support the Regional Office in their oversight role, while generating useful learning that COs and RO could reflect on and harness over the course of the response. Country-level recommendations are included in country Annexes C-F. Both RO and COs had numerous opportunities to share their feedback on the recommendations including the workshop where they were presented and discussed.

* **UNICEF RO should support COs to reflect on their experiences and lessons learnt from COVID-19 crisis responses.** UNICEF as a learning organization cultivates new knowledge and insights gained from the past experiences to continuously expand its capacity to respond to emerging education and learning needs under crisis. Given the unprecedented magnitude of COVID-19 pandemic and the length of school closure in the region, UNICEF needs to update country programmes based on lessons learnt and strengthen coordination mechanisms to improve the effectiveness of UNICEF’s response measures.
* **UNICEF RO should support COs and governments to strengthen resilience to complex, long-term crisis through system strengthening.** The ongoing spread of COVID-19 and continued climate change have demonstrated a difficulty in assessing the impact of crisis in terms of both scale and length. To ensure the provision and continuity of education and learning under uncertainty, UNICEF should support governments to strengthen resilience of education system against complex, long-term crisis at scale, for example by facilitating investment in innovation and technologies including remote learning and supporting the revision of contingency plans and coordination mechanisms.
* **UNICEF RO should support COs and governments to ensure that child rights and equity in education and learning are mainstreamed at all stages of crisis responses from planning, implementation and monitoring.** Unequal access to support, including access to digital learning, has widened educational inequality further during the pandemic. UNICEF as a champion of child rights need to ensure that vulnerable children including children with disabilities, ethnic/language minorities, refugees/migrants, and those from poor families and in rural areas equally benefit from crisis responses of UNICEF and the government. UNICEF acknowledges the need to increase the focus on children with disabilities in the crises cycle.
* **UNICEF RO should support COs and governments in gender responsive programming in preparedness of crises.** COs and governments should prepare for challenges in regard to girls’ education and learning compounded by crises including the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, early marriage and gender-based violence may have been exacerbated during school closures. UNICEF needs to monitor and assess the impact of crisis on girls’ education and address barriers they face through gender-transformative programming. During future crises, gender parity in education enrolment should not preclude the need for gender-responsive approaches. Instead, programming should be proactive.
* **UNICEF RO should demonstrate the long-term value of digital learning and support COs and governments to develop the national vision and standards for digital learning.** While school closures demonstrated the importance of face-to-face learning, digital/remote learning has changed the education landscape with new ways of delivering education and learning. To fully harness the technological innovation to improve learning experience for all children, UNICEF should demonstrate how digital learning can best support and complement face-to-face learning and produce value added in a long run. For instance, institutionalizing teacher training on digital teaching and learning would be key to better prepare teachers for similar crisis. UNICEF should also strengthen the foundation for digital learning at country level by helping the governments develop the national vision and standards as well as quality assurance mechanisms for digital learning. Specific standards should also be developed for children with disabilities in regard to digital and online learning.
* **UNICEF RO should support COs and governments to provide remedial learning, while addressing deficit of data.** Providing targeted and rights-based interventions for remedial learning would be important to help the countries to recover learning loss that might have occurred due to school closures and unequal access to remote learning. This would be most important for children with disabilities, who were difficult to reach throughout the pandemic.
* **UNICEF should improve its use of proxies when specific indicators are not available while also focusing on capacity strengthening to improve alternative approaches to data collection.** When limited information is available, priority should be given to assessing the needs of vulnerable children in light of what support is already available by the government and other partners and monitoring the effectiveness of UNICEF's support for these children specifically

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1. List of interviewees

#### Azerbaijan

* Two UNICEF CO staff members (interviewed together).
* One IOE staff member.
* One MoE staff member.
* One academic partner.

#### Serbia

* Two UNICEF CO staff members (interviewed together).
* Three MoESTD staff members (interviewed together).
* One academic partner and one CSO partner (interviewed together).

#### Turkey

* Two UNICEF CO staff members (interviewed separately).
* One CSO partner (10 staff members interviewed together).

#### BiH

* Two UNICEF CO staff members (interviewed together).

1. Interview schedule

Education RTA interview questions for UNICEF Country Offices (DRAFT)

*Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Turkey*

**Part 1 – UNICEF’s response to COVID-19 through learning support**

**1.1 Distance and digital learning**

* + What plans/programmes did UNICEF facilitate to support distance and digital learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? Can you help me understand the timeline of these plans/programmes?
  + How well-designed and conceptualised (relevant) were these plans/programmes in regard to supporting learning?
  + In what ways did these plans/programmes work well in supporting learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways did they not work well?
  + Did these plans/programmes explicitly support learning for girl children, Roma children, refugee children, and children with disabilities? What were the key enablers of and barriers to equitable distance and digital learning during this time?
  + How easy was it to change and adapt plans/programmes to suit the changing learning needs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic? Can you offer examples of what needed to change?
  + In what ways did these plans/programmes support the education system more broadly and in the long term?
  + Overall, what do you consider to be the successes, challenges, and necessary improvements in regard to these plans/programmes?

**1.2 School reopening and face-to-face learning**

* + What plans/programmes did UNICEF facilitate to support school reopening and face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? Can you help me understand the timeline of these plans/programmes?
  + How well-designed and conceptualised (relevant) were these plans/programmes in regard to supporting face-to-face learning?
  + In what ways did these plans/programmes work well in supporting face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways did they not work well?
  + Did these plans/programmes explicitly support learning for girl children, Roma children, refugee children, and children with disabilities? What were the key enablers of and barriers to ensuring equitable and inclusive engagement with face-to-face learning?
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  + Overall, what do you consider to be the successes, challenges, and necessary improvements in regard to these plans/programmes?

**1.3 Teacher support and training**

* + What plans/programmes did UNICEF facilitate to support teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic? Can you help me understand the timeline of these plans/programmes?
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  + In what ways did these plans/programmes support the education system more broadly and in the long term?
  + Overall, what do you consider to be the successes, challenges, and necessary improvements in regard to these plans/programmes?

**Part 2 – UNICEF’S response to COVID-19 through sector support**

**2.1 Partner coordination**

* + In what ways has UNICEF been coordinating with and supporting partners during the COVID-19 pandemic? Can you help me understand how these partnerships have developed?
  + In what ways did these partnerships work well in supporting the education system and its stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways did they not work well?
  + Did any of these partnerships explicitly support the education of girl children, Roma children, refugee children, and children with disabilities?
  + How easy was it to change and adapt the nature of these partnerships to suit the changing educational needs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic? Can you offer examples of what needed to change?
  + In what ways did these partnerships support the education system more broadly and in the long term?
  + Overall, what do you consider to be the successes, challenges, and necessary improvements in regard to these partnerships?

**2.2 Data collection and management**

* + To what extent has UNICEF’s work during this period involved data collection and management? Can you help me understand how these data collection and management plans have developed?
  + How well-designed and conceptualised (relevant) were these data collection and management strategies in regard to supporting the education sector?
  + In what ways did these data collection and management plans work well in supporting the education system and its stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways did they not work well?
  + Did any of these data collection and management plans explicitly support the education of girl children, Roma children, refugee children, and children with disabilities?
  + How easy was it to change and adapt the data collection and management plans to suit changing educational needs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic? Can you offer examples of what needed to change?
  + In what ways did data collection and management during this time support the education system more broadly and in the long term?
  + Overall, what do you consider to be the successes, challenges, and necessary improvements in regard to data collection and management?

**2.3 Advocacy**

* + To what extent has UNICEF’s work during this period involved advocacy? Can you help me understand how these advocacy plans have developed?
  + How well-designed and conceptualised (relevant) were these advocacy strategies in regard to supporting the education sector?
  + In what ways did these advocacy plans work well in supporting the education system and its stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways did they not work well?
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  + In what ways did advocacy during this time support the education system more broadly and in the long term?
  + Overall, what do you consider to be the successes, challenges, and necessary improvements in regard to advocacy?

Education RTA interview questions for civil society organisations (DRAFT)

*Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Turkey*

**Part 1 – UNICEF’s response to COVID-19 through learning support**

**1.1 Distance and digital learning**

* + Did UNICEF facilitate any plans/programmes to support distance and digital learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? Was your organisation involved in any of these plans/programmes? Can you help me understand the timeline of these plans/programmes?
  + How well-designed and conceptualised (relevant) were these plans/programmes in regard to supporting learning?
  + In what ways did these plans/programmes work well in supporting learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways did they not work well?
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  + How easy was it for UNICEF to change and adapt plans/programmes to suit the changing learning needs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic? Can you offer examples of what needed to change?
  + In what ways did these plans/programmes support the education system more broadly and in the long term? In what ways did these plans/programmes support your organisation’s work?
  + Overall, what do you consider to be the successes, challenges, and necessary improvements in regard to UNICEF’s plans/programmes?

**1.2 School reopening and face-to-face learning**

* + What plans/programmes did UNICEF facilitate to support school reopening and face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? Was your organisation involved in any of these plans? Can you help me understand the timeline of these plans/programmes?
  + How well-designed and conceptualised (relevant) were these plans/programmes in regard to supporting face-to-face learning?
  + In what ways did these plans/programmes work well in supporting face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways did they not work well?
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  + Overall, what do you consider to be the successes, challenges, and necessary improvements in regard to UNICEF’s plans/programmes?

**1.3 Teacher support and training**

* + What plans/programmes did UNICEF facilitate to support teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic? Was your organisation involved in any of these plans? Can you help me understand the timeline of these plans/programmes?
  + How well-designed and conceptualised (relevant) were these plans/programmes in supporting teachers?
  + In what ways did these plans/programmes work well in supporting teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways did they not work well?
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  + Overall, what do you consider to be the successes, challenges, and necessary improvements in regard to UNICEF’s plans/programmes?

**Part 2 – UNICEF’s response to COVID-19 through sector support**

**2.1 Partner coordination**

* + In what ways has UNICEF been coordinating with and supporting partners during the COVID-19 pandemic? What was the nature of your organisation’s partnership with UNICEF? Can you help me understand how these partnerships have developed?
  + In what ways did these partnerships work well in supporting the education system and its stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways did they not work well?
  + Did any of these partnerships explicitly support the education of girl children, Roma children, refugee children, and children with disabilities?
  + How easy was it for UNICEF to change and adapt the nature of these partnerships to suit the changing educational needs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic? Can you offer examples of what needed to change?
  + In what ways did these partnerships support the education system more broadly and in the long term? In what ways did these partnerships support your organisation’s work?
  + Overall, what do you consider to be the successes, challenges, and necessary improvements in regard to UNICEF’s partnerships more generally, or your organisation’s partnership with UNICEF?

**2.2 Data collection and management**

* + To what extent has UNICEF’s work during this period involved data collection and management? Was your organisation involved in any of UNICEF’s data collection and management? Can you help me understand how these data collection and management plans have developed?
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Education RTA interview questions for government (DRAFT)

*Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Turkey*

**Part 1 – UNICEF’s response to COVID-19 through learning support**

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**Part 2 – UNICEF’s response to COVID-19 through sector support**

**2.1 Partner coordination**

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1. Azerbaijan country-specific assessment
   1. Main areas of response

UNICEF’s education response to COVID-19 learning support took a variety of different forms at different stages of the pandemic, often with the purpose of ‘plugging gaps’ that UNICEF identified in the government’s response. Interviewees identified three main areas of work that UNICEF engaged in during this time:

* guidelines for online learning;
* teacher support; and
* data collection and management.

Each of these three areas is discussed and analysed in Part 1 of this annex. Part 2 reflects on UNICEF’s response to COVID-19 in regard to its effectiveness and relevance, equity and inclusion, adaptability, system strengthening, and successes, challenges and lessons learned.

Continuity of learning

#### Guidelines for online learning

At the beginning of the pandemic UNICEF worked closely with the IOE – a subsidiary organisation of the MoE – to address the immediate needs relating to online learning. In particular, UNICEF was able to draw on global guidance in order to develop guidelines for schools, principals, and teachers who were operating remotely. This was an approach that UNICEF advocated for, convincing both the MoE and IOE that clear instructions would be essential in an education culture with high regulation, where teachers require clear expectations.

Together with IOE, UNICEF developed protocols and instructions for schools in regard to how to switch to online learning and how to plan online lessons, since the learning time for online learning needed to be adjusted. These were considered interim solutions to keep the education system running during the initial school closures. However, the key principles and expectations outlined in these guidelines remained in place throughout the pandemic, despite the confusion caused by frequent switching of teaching modalities.

The protocols and guidelines that UNICEF helped to develop in support of online learning were considered very effective and relevant by all interviewed stakeholders. These protocols were introduced in all schools and then used by the MoE as the basis for the further expansion of teacher guidance. When the education in emergencies assessment was conducted in March 2021, it found that 90% of school principals were informed about how to organise distance education, but that this guidance had not so effectively reached teachers.

In part, these guidelines were so effective because UNICEF was able to draw on global guidance – in the form of memos developed by the UNICEF Headquarters – to develop local protocols very quickly. Without UNICEF’s support, interviewees anticipated that it would have taken months for the MoE to develop similar protocols.

While the initial guidelines were for all schools, the MoE later asked UNICEF for help in developing guidelines for schools that serve children with disabilities. UNICEF did not have internal specialists in this area, and UNICEF’s global guidelines did not provide disability-specific resources. However, the UNICEF CO was able to provide the MoE with financial support to hire an external consultant who developed the necessary guidelines.

#### Teacher training

In response to the emergency situation caused by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the Karabakh region, UNICEF supported the provision of psychosocial support for teachers in the regions that had been affected by violence and displacement. UNICEF provided funding and a consultant to organise this training, thus ensuring state ownership of the programme. There was very high demand for this psychosocial support and teachers were very motivated to participate in it. This was in stark contrast to the pre-COVID-19 period, when teachers were reluctant to participate in training.

The training took place online and according to the academic who developed the course material it concerned ‘psychological empowerment through sharing and discussion’. The purpose of the training was to develop teachers' own capacity to cope, and to create effective and positive relationships in schools and with families. While the training did not specifically focus on vulnerable or marginalised groups, it was intended that the training would support inclusive schools more generally, and would train teachers to be responsive to the needs of all children. It was therefore designed to be applicable to relationships with all children and families.

Although this psychosocial training was initially developed for those affected by war, experience suggested that the participating teachers had been more traumatised by COVID-19 than the conflict. One interviewee identified that post-traumatic stress disorder was a big issue, and that teachers needed to be equipped with basic skills relating to mental health. Furthermore, it was identified that such psychosocial competencies should be part of the mainstream teacher education curriculum in order that they become a daily practice, rather than a disaster mitigation strategy.

UNICEF and the IOE are therefore preparing to introduce socio-emotional learning more widely as an aspect of teacher preparation in order to create a culture of psychosocial competencies. The course will be offered to schoolteachers during their CPD. In reopening, it might be one of priorities for teachers and for the institute.

According to the 2020 UNICEF End of Year Summary, UNICEF also supported the implementation of the State Programme on Inclusive Education. This included a teacher training programme introduced into the formal curriculum of national pre- and in-service teacher training. This training reached over 10,000 primary school teachers (99% women), 320 university teachers, and 1,300 students of pedagogical universities trained in inclusive education approaches.

#### Data collection and monitoring

The Socioeconomic Assessment for COVID-19 (August 2020) that was coordinated by the United Nations, and which UNICEF conducted for the education sector, helped to position UNICEF as the lead partner for MoE during this time. This desk-research analysis followed the overall methodology of the *Post-Disaster Needs Assessment Guidelines*, developed jointly in 2013 by the United Nations system, the World Bank, and the EU. It quantified the costs of COVID-19 and identified the short-, medium-, and long-term actions that should be taken. The report was shared by the United Nations and then accepted by the government. This exercise helped to identify the key areas where UNICEF could contribute, including teacher support and issuing guidelines for schools.

Over the course of the pandemic two pieces of research were conducted. One of these monitored the education system in Karabakh, where civil conflict disrupted schooling (led by the IOE). It was entitled ‘Education in Emergencies Needs Assessment’ (April 2021). The other was a National Learning Assessment which monitored the learning losses due to the COVID-19 lockdown (led by UNICEF). The Education in Emergencies Needs Assessment found that across nine districts, 95% of schools during the conflict period stopped functioning (providing direct or remote learning) for an average of five weeks. Furthermore, 78% of households reported that they had faced some challenges assessing digital education between September 2020 and March 2021.

Using the results of these two assessments, UNICEF worked with the IOE to develop a proposal for targeted learning support. The geographical scope of the proposal was based on the needs identified in these assessments, and included three conflict-affected districts and three of the districts which suffered the worst learning losses during the pandemic. These programmes – which began in October 2021 and will last for nine months – plan to reach 1,500 children who have the biggest learning gaps and who require significant learning support, including children with disabilities and girl children.

Interviewees highly commended UNICEF’s data collection, which they considered an essential tool in advocating for future interventions. As one interviewee commented: ‘the MoE is more reactive than proactive and the data evidence factor is important because it helped us to influence and support the programming and justify the needs’. In particular, the evidence provided by the data collection exercises clearly demonstrated the ways in which COVID-19 had compounded disadvantage, and therefore the need for interventions that promote equity.

The ability of UNICEF to work across stakeholders, and to draw upon expertise in various areas, meant that data collection exercises were both efficient and of high quality. According to an interviewee from the government, all data collected by UNICEF were relevant and useful for future education planning. However, the UNICEF CO reported challenges associated with encouraging the MoE to be proactive in conducting its own analysis and making data-driven decisions. In this regard UNICEF played an important role in strengthening the education sector at a systems level.

* 1. Assessment of UNICEF’s response

Effectiveness and relevance

UNICEF’s education response to COVID-19 in Azerbaijan was considered to be highly effective, particularly given the relatively small size of its CO. Particularly effective was UNICEF’s ability to work at a systemic level and at scale, which distinguished it from other actors in the education sector.

In large part, UNICEF’s effectiveness was due to the CO’s excellent working relationship with the IOE, and the trust it enjoys with the MoE. Government representatives described the very close working relationship that they had with UNICEF, particularly at the beginning of the school closures, when they would frequently work through the night together. This close working relationship, supported by a shared vision, ensured that UNICEF’s contribution aligned with the government’s agenda.

For example, one interviewee explained:

‘*The quality of partnerships would be different without UNICEF. UNICEF is good in bringing the best practices from UNICEF network from the whole world. UNICEF has long history of partnership with state and non-state partners, UNICEF can easily identify the relevant donors and to bring the financial support also to some ideas which is very important. The quality would be different otherwise. I’ve been working as coordinator for other projects and had lots of good ideas but it was lack of financing. UNICEF does this work well*.’

However, government representatives noted that the international best practice that UNICEF would often share was not always relevant to the Azerbaijani context. In particular, they noted that much of the COVID-19 guidance shared by UNICEF was better targeted at low-income countries. As a result, the guidelines and approaches shared by UNICEF often needed to be adapted to the local context by government agencies.

Equity and inclusion

Equity and inclusion proved to be difficult issues throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection conducted by UNICEF, such as the National Learning Assessment, helped to identify learning inequalities, and in particular the lack of internet access and digital devices. These studies found that 30% of children in Azerbaijan did not have access to digital distance learning. Equally, the education in emergencies study (UNICEF, 2021) provided evidence of learning loss created by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It identified children from low-income households as being the most vulnerable to learning loss, though it also found that around a third of caregivers of children with disabilities (15) reported specific disability-related challenges to accessing and attending school, while girls’ school enrolment may also have been impacted. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the assessment found that 100% of children aged 10–14 were enrolled for the 2019/20 school year (100% of boys attending regularly, 98% of girls attending regularly) and 95% of children aged 15–17 were reportedly enrolled and attending regularly. However, for the 2020/21 school year, reported enrolment of girls aged 15–17 dropped to 89%, and among all children aged 10–14 it dropped to 98%. Reported enrolment of younger children for 2020/21 also appears lower than average: 95% of boys aged six to nine and 97% of girls aged six to nine.

Despite these reports, interviewees felt that there was a lack of data relating to children with disabilities – who were not involved in digital learning – and children who were home-schooled – who would usually be visited by subject teachers, since until recently UNICEF has lacked resource capacity to directly reach these children. Given the scale of the challenge posed by COVID-19, donors were also unwilling to address the specific needs of CwD since they were a minority within the education system. However, following the conflict UNICEF did develop psychosocial support for teachers in the conflict-affected regions, and has developed plans to offer learning support to three regions affected by conflict, and three regions experiencing significant learning loss.

According to interviewees, Azerbaijan enjoys gender parity in regard to school enrolment. Interventions targeting girl children were therefore not considered a priority. However, one interviewee noted the lack of data regarding girls’ participation in online learning in rural areas. This interviewee suggested that girls in rural areas might be prevented from learning by the expectation that they complete household chores. If this is the case, the learning gap may only be noticed in two to three years. The interviewee argued that UNICEF needs to be more proactive in this regard, but recognised the tendency of some stakeholders to keep unflattering information confidential. Furthermore, given the specificities of the COVID-19 school closures, it is very hard to measure drop-out rates based on the traditional methodology for calculating drop-outs.

Adaptability and flexibility

UNICEF was unanimously considered to have a highly adaptable response when lockdown measures were introduced in March 2020. While other agencies were still analysing the situation, UNICEF was able to quickly formulate plans. For example, it was able to produce guidelines for schools at great speed.

Three factors contributed to UNICEF’s adaptability during this time:

* The first was UNICEF’s ability to draw on international best practice. This was possible due to the work of UNICEF Headquarters, which was then translated into Azerbaijani and shared at speed. As a result, UNICEF was seen by the MoE as immediately having something to contribute.
* The second factor was UNICEF’s emergency response plan exercises, which it had practised in 2019 – a year before the pandemic. While at the time of this exercise the CO had felt it was a waste of time, when the national lockdown occurred the UNICEF programme staff immediately knew what to do and were clear about what they could contribute.
* Lastly, UNICEF’s funding was easily adaptable. The CO drew on thematic funds to implement plans while it waited for donors to make contributions. This proved to be an important advantage over the MoE, which typically planned budgets a year in advance and was therefore not as financially flexible.

System strengthening

The contribution of UNICEF’s response to strengthening education systems was mixed. On the one hand, relationships between the CO and MoE were strengthened, and trust was significantly enhanced. While the relationship had always been positive, the COVID-19 emergency gave UNICEF the opportunity to demonstrate the speed and quality of its response, as well as the commitment of its staff. The intensified working conditions built strong relationships between colleagues.

Evidence of this strengthening collaboration between the MoE and UNICEF came during the National Learning Assessment, which was conducted by the MoE and the IOE. In 2020 UNICEF was not part of discussions regarding the National Learning Assessment. However, in 2021 UNICEF was invited to participate in the planning stage to discuss the learning issues that the MoE and IOE were interested in measuring. As a result of UNICEF’s feedback, research tools were incorporated which sought to understand children’s own perspectives regarding their welfare.

However, as the CO itself identified, UNICEF’s interventions during COVID-19 served to ‘provide some spare parts for the system to function, rather than really rebuilding the system’. This emergency support was achieved through the provision of global resources and the urgent provision of psychosocial support to those affected by war. In this emergency context, ‘it would have been too ambitious to hope for systems impact’.

Nonetheless, important lessons were drawn from this experience (as outlined below), which may in the long term serve to strengthen the education system in Azerbaijan.

Challenges

There were several challenges that UNICEF faced when implementing an education response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The greatest challenge was the lack of methodologically sound approaches to measuring the impact of UNICEF’s interventions. As one interviewee noted, ‘this broke the chain, when you deliver the results and input results, but you cannot really see enough evidence of the results’. For example, the UNICEF CO knew that school principals had received guidance, but could not get a sense of how or whether that guidance was being implemented. Attempts to conduct proper monitoring of schools, and to have direct communications with schools, did not work well, perhaps due to the strain placed on teachers during this time.

At times, donors had unrealistic expectations regarding impact assessment. The UK Embassy, for example, had provided funding for psychosocial support for children who had suffered conflict and COVID-19. This donor wished to see evidence for the effectiveness of this kind of training. In this instance UNICEF explained that it would require three to six months to pass before the impact was likely to be felt.

Interviewees also identified a lack of experience in dealing with emergencies. The last education-related emergency that the Azerbaijan CO had operated in was over 20 years ago. Although the CO had completed emergency training exercises, the combination of the COVID-19 emergency and the emergency created by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict placed significant strain on limited human resources. As one interviewee noted:

*‘In February 2020 the schools closed and in September 2020 the country was in war. We had to add this conflict response agenda so we had to split [our focus]. The needs were very urgent and we had to respond immediately. The need for psychosocial support came and we switched there, so really it was impossible to keep the focus programmatically from human resources and finance side to keep it running in both directions. They are two different types of emergencies and they required reprogramming.’*

Furthermore, both of these emergencies coincided with the last year of the country programme cycle, during which time the CO was required to report to donors on previous commitments and then plan the new country programme for the following year. The CO had already collected evidence for the new country programme and developed several plans, but these plans had to be abandoned or postponed while UNICEF focused on the COVID-19 response.

Lastly, the CO identified the lack of implementing partners as contributing to the limitations in its own response to COVID-19. In Azerbaijan CSOs are not allowed to work in schools, which limits the number of partners who can implement interventions in schools. UNICEF has tried to identify other partners and stakeholders, such as think tanks, research agencies, and academics. However, ‘the landscape is empty’, which meant that UNICEF had no choice but to rely on the MoE, which was already overstretched.

Lessons learned

Several important lessons were learned during this period, both in terms of UNICEF’s future education programming strategy and the way in which it operates in Azerbaijan.

All partners identified the need for more digital infrastructure (e.g. internet coverage, digital devices in schools) in Azerbaijan, and the mainstreaming of more contemporary pedagogies which focus on student-centred learning through the use of digital platforms. As one interviewee summarised: ‘digital platforms are here to stay’. In particular, it was possible to deliver teacher training and support very effectively online, and online teacher support groups were able to organically develop. Future directions in education may therefore see a mainstreaming of digital education, particularly for adults, which will require leveraging the digital skills development acquired during COVID-19.

COVID-19 also highlighted the importance of parents’ role in education. Interviewees reported that in Azerbaijan prior to COVID-19 parents typically did not see education as their responsibility. However, teachers' communication with parents during distance learning has developed an awareness of parents’ role in the education system, and led the UNICEF CO to reflect on how parents can be better engaged through education programming in the future.

The emphasis that UNICEF placed on psychosocial support for teachers and students during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict proved to be very worthwhile. Interviewees reported that teachers required psychosocial support not only due to the war but also to help them manage COVID-19. According to the UNICEF CO, mental health has become part of the national discussion in regard to teachers, parents, and students. The MoE is interested in this kind of support, and is supportive of UNICEF when it offers mental health training. The issue of mental health may therefore be a future priority.

In regard to the way in which UNICEF operates in Azerbaijan, the CO recognises the need to identify and invest in other education partners with whom it can collaborate. As discussed above, the availability of other partners would reduce UNICEF’s dependence on the MoE.

Furthermore, the UNICEF CO has identified the need for greater human resources in the case of future emergencies. Throughout 2020 and 2021, UNICEF’s education response in Azerbaijan has largely been the work of one person.

Azerbaijan country-specific recommendations

* UNICEF Azerbaijan should seek to develop the capacity of the partner landscape within Azerbaijan.
* UNICEF Azerbaijan should consider increasing the size of its education team in Azerbaijan.
* UNICEF Azerbaijan should look beyond gender parity in school enrolment as a measure of gender equality.
* UNICEF Azerbaijan should consolidate its learning from the COVID-19 emergency in order to be better prepared for future emergencies.
* UNICEF Azerbaijan should place a greater focus on disability in its COVID-19 recovery programming.
* UNICEF Azerbaijan should support the development of digital infrastructure within Azerbaijan, perhaps learning from Turkey and Serbia.
* UNICEF Azerbaijan should better consider the role of parents in future education programming.

1. Turkey country-specific assessment
   1. Main areas of response

Continuity of learning

#### EBA and EBA centres

EBA is an educational content network in Turkey, founded by MoNE. The site is designed and run by the Innovation and Educational Technologies General Directorate, which is affiliated with the ministry. The purpose of the network is to integrate technology with education when required. The network gives online access to course materials to teachers and students. Parents and teachers can also access EBA.

Prior to COVID-19, EBA was a repository of documents and information which teachers and students could download. However, as schools began to close, MoNE quickly transformed EBA into an online platform where millions of children can follow lessons and classrooms interactively. During this time UNICEF supported MoNE to increase EBA’s bandwidth, since so many more children were connecting at the same time.

UNICEF’s focus at this time was to support MoNE from an equity perspective. Although EBA was accessible to everyone with an ID, many homes – particularly those of refugees – could not access EBA due to their lack of devices. To address this issue, following the outbreak of COVID-19, MoNE launched EBA centres, which are multi-purpose centres in schools and community centres where children who do not have access to internet or devices can access EBA. MoNE provided 12,000 EBA centres, and UNICEF supported 170 EBA centres, specifically targeting provinces and districts where there are a lot of refugee children.

However, the effectiveness of the EBA centres was questioned by the UNICEF CO representative. The UNICEF CO acknowledged that in the 170 UNICEF-run centres, the attendance rate of children was not high. A number of factors contribute to this under-utilisation:

* The distance from children’s homes to the EBA centres was sometimes too great.
* There was not always effective supervision in the centres, which meant that if a computer in the EBA centre was not working then no-one was sufficiently skilled to fix it.
* The national regulations designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 also prevented children from leaving their home in the morning. However, since the EBA classes were held in the mornings, children could not attend classes at the EBA centres.

Over time, some of these challenges were addressed. For example, the issue of distance was mitigated by providing transportation, and EBA centres were established in centres belonging to NGOs which were more embedded in local communities. However, interviewees identified more that could have been done to attract children to EBA centres. For example, packages of support could have been provided, such as stationery, books, and snacks. Similarly, better analysis could have been conducted to identify where there was demand for such centres.

Ultimately, now that schools have reopened, the investment in EBA centres has not been wasted. EBA centres have been turned into computer labs in schools, and can be repurposed if a similar crisis arises.

#### Learner toolkits

During the period in which schools were closed (March 2020 – June 2020) UNICEF distributed learner toolkits to more than 75,000 refugee and vulnerable children who may not have had access to EBA. These toolkits contained stationery, books, and hygiene materials.

#### Learning app for disabled children

UNICEF contributed to an app that was created to assist the learning of disabled children, and provided some materials for this app. However, interviewees admitted that this was an area that was lacking in UNICEF’s approach, since disabled children proved to be the most vulnerable and unreachable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Safe school reopening

#### School reopening messaging

As schools reopened, UNICEF supported MoNE in regard to communications and messaging. For example, UNICEF supported the messaging on hygiene practices for schools which were reopening. UNICEF also ensured that information was made available to parents regarding the changing schedule of school opening, since for some time children in different school grades were attending school on alternate days to maintain social distancing. Crucially, this messaging was in both Turkish and Arabic, to ensure that refugee parents were aware of when to send their children to school.

#### Hygiene products

In order to prepare schools for reopening, UNICEF facilitated the distribution of hygiene materials to schools. UNICEF prepared a menu of materials that schools could pick from – e.g. face masks, hand sanitiser – and schools chose what they wanted within a set budget, to ensure that they were ready to welcome students. This proved very effective given that each school had different needs.

Teacher support

#### Teacher training

UNICEF provided capacity development opportunities for 190,000 teachers on distance learning and learning during school closures, since these were new areas that many teachers struggled with. Teachers were able to enrol during the summer holidays for these classes, and each course lasted three to four weeks. UNICEF and MoNE developed the training together, with MoNE providing a concept note on the areas they wished the training to cover and UNICEF developing the content.

Trainers were hired by MoNE and UNICEF contributed to sessions on child wellbeing, child protection, and safety online, so that teachers could benefit directly from the latest research regarding these topics. The content of the training courses also included how to interact with children online, how to use Teams or Zoom, mental health training and psychosocial support, and how to identify mental distress in children. Interviewees noted that the training went beyond the traditional role of the teacher in the classroom and also engaged with teachers as social workers who are embedded in their communities.

Data collected by MoNE (though not yet officially shared) suggest that the teacher support offered by UNICEF was effective. At the beginning of the pandemic teachers reported that they were not ready to teach online and wanted to continue teaching face-to-face. However, after nine months, when surveyed again, teachers felt able to teach face-to-face but with an online component. Pre- and post-tests of the teachers who took the courses similarly suggested that teachers were very positive about the training. However, interviewees noted that the inability to observe classrooms meant that monitoring and evaluation of this training had limitations.

Perhaps the best indicator that the training was relevant was the large number of teachers enrolled in the courses. The original target was to reach 100,000 teachers, but 190,000 participated. This meant that almost 20% of all teachers in Turkey signed up for a voluntary course during their summer holidays. It was possible to reach so many teachers due to the online modality.

Another teacher capacity building programme has also been developed for early childhood development and primary school teachers, entitled ‘Building Teachers’ Capacity on Teaching Basic Literacy and Numeracy in Online Settings’. This training has resulted from observations that children are struggling to learn literacy and numeracy online, meaning that many students now entering Grade 2 do not have adequate proficiency. The purpose of the training is to ensure that teachers have the capacity to teach basic literacy and numeracy in hybrid settings. UNICEF has supported MoNE to develop modules for teachers, and to develop activity books for teachers and children.

#### Psychosocial support programme

Mental health problems have been identified as an important effect of COVID-19. UNICEF has been working with the special education and counselling services Director General to understand the challenges faced by children during the COVID-19 period.

MoNE began to address mental health problems by opening a 24-hour hotline for families and teachers, which answered questions and helped them to understand the situation. However, when this was found to be insufficient, UNICEF supported MoNE in developing psychosocial education programmes, during which UNICEF consultants discussed initial interventions that might be useful for those traumatised by the effects of COVID-19. A similar cyber-bullying programme was also developed to address issues that children were facing while working on the internet. Guides for school counsellors were developed to help counsellors support children online.

According to one interviewee, the psychosocial support programmes have been the most effective activity that UNICEF has been involved in throughout COVID-19.

Data and monitoring

UNICEF worked closely with the MoNE and its stakeholders to collect and manage data regarding COVID-19. The CO reported regularly on COVID-19 indicators and had partners who reported weekly on targets.

Collecting data was challenging for several reasons. New partners found weekly data collection difficult and this required UNICEF to explain carefully why the data were necessary and what they were going to be used for. The Turkish education system is also very centralised and does not tend to share data easily. Although UNICEF was able to access data on a monthly basis, these data were often not appropriately disaggregated. Currently, UNICEF is trying to negotiate access to data on Syrian refugees to understand if they are returning to school.

Nonetheless, UNICEF has tried to be a repository for all available data, in particular monitoring how Turkey fared in terms of the ICT response, and the effect of COVID-19 on attendance. For example, each month UNICEF releases data on how many children are attending EBA classes online. In this regard UNICEF has acted as an important interlocutor for donors, who require data to justify their programming, and who often struggle to receive data from MoNE.

According to the UNICEF CO interviewee, UNICEF aims to keep collecting and collating data regardless of the approval of MoNE, since data are essential for advocacy purposes. Data are also required to develop future UNICEF strategies in the country.

* 1. Assessment of UNICEF’s response

Effectiveness and relevance

Interviewees largely considered UNICEF’s response in Turkey to COVID-19 to be ‘timely and catalytic’. According to one CSO, this was in contrast to other United Nations agencies, which had struggled to develop a plan in the early stages of the pandemic: ‘When we compare other United Nations agencies, UNICEF decision-making processes and actions are always better than other United Nations agencies and the communications mechanism is better than with others’.

In part, the effectiveness of UNICEF’s work was due to its strong and trusted relationship with the government. UNICEF has operated in Turkey for 60 years, and interviewees noted that working together on the Syrian refugee crisis led to greater trust and mutual understanding between UNICEF and the government. As one interviewee noted, UNICEF is the ‘partner of choice’ for MoNE. This is in part because education in Turkey is seen as a national security issue so very few NGOs have active protocols with MoNE, meaning that they cannot work in schools and classrooms. Since UNICEF leads the sector response to the refugee crisis it is granted the opportunity to work closely with the government to advise and discuss.

The trust enjoyed between UNICEF and MoNE was attributed to UNICEF’s interest in MoNE’s priorities. An interviewee described how, ‘we always ask them what their needs are. There are lots of teas and coffees. We are not the World Bank – we don’t have millions and millions [of dollars] but we try to spend in the best areas possible’. Furthermore, the pandemic has positively affected the relationship, bringing people from MoNE and UNICEF together for the purposes of collective action and exchange: ‘there is a willingness to go beyond the usual stuff, and this you only do if you trust each other… we did not run away. This was felt positively from partners and the ministry’.

However, the effectiveness of UNICEF’s support in the area of education could not be rigorously measured due to the lack of either formative or summative assessments during school closures. Furthermore, MoNE waived the requirement to maintain attendance records for all children during the 2020 school year.

Flexibility and adaptability

UNICEF’s flexibility and adaptability was seen as a key strength, particularly over other partners who were slower to respond to COVID-19. The CSO who worked closely with UNICEF, for example, explained that its requests to change plans in response to COVID-19 were accepted quickly, and that UNICEF’s innovation process was fast. For example, UNICEF supported the CSO’s activities to move online, and added a budget line to support hygiene product distribution to schools. The CSO was also able to adapt the way it provided financing to vulnerable families, and to establish a call centre so that counselling could be offered virtually.

The UNICEF CO credited the ability to be flexible to its education strategy. Having an education strategy that the team agreed on gave the team a starting point for reflection and adaptation of the strategy. As one interviewee explained: ‘it helped to have something on paper which helped us to think what we needed to amend. It worked very well. It helped us to strategize and be flexible… every time there was global guidance we looked to see if it was relevant and then we adapted it’.

However, there were challenges in regard to the adaptability of funding as one interviewee reported difficulty in reallocating funds that had been earmarked for existing programmes. This required UNICEF to get in touch with donors to request that funds be reallocated for emergency purposes. Other programmes – such as monitoring students' learning, attendance, and participation – were put on hold while UNICEF focused on the effects of COVID-19.

Equity

The Turkey CO saw its role in supporting the Turkish MoNE as being largely to promote equity. One interviewee noted that ‘UNICEF is well positioned to steer discussions of equity and vulnerable children’.

UNICEF’s largest equity agenda was supporting refugee children, as evidenced by its decision to open EBA centres in areas with large refugee populations. By amending the Regional Refugee Response Plan to take into consideration COVID-19, UNICEF provided opportunities for donors to fund necessary refugee support. However, one criticism of UNICEF’s approach was that it primarily focused on Syrian refugees (for which funding was available), rather than on the wider refugee population. Due to the focus on Syrian refugees, UNICEF often did not provide resources in languages other than Arabic, despite many refugees not speaking Arabic.

As mentioned above, interviewees also felt that UNICEF’s support for children with disabilities was slow during this period, particularly given that many children with disabilities were not accessing any form of learning. Only recently has a needs analysis been conducted to understand how children with disabilities can benefit from distance education. As a result of this needs analysis, digital materials and guidebooks for teachers and families will be developed. This is a separate project from EBA, which was designed for typically developing children. It is unfortunate, however, that such provision is being developed more than 18 months after the start of the pandemic.

The UNICEF CO reported that for every UNICEF programme sex and age disaggregated data are collected; however, according KIIs the office has not seen a difference on the educational impacts of COVID-19 in terms of gender. It is therefore not a programming priority for the CO, and may be considered a gap in implementation

Sector coordination

UNICEF established four sector working groups at the national level, and more at the sub-national level, to monitor the COVID-19 situation closely and update partners on needs. Every six weeks UNICEF organised a sector group meeting, thus creating a platform where opportunities and information could be shared. Given that governance in Turkey is very centralised and information sometimes does not ‘trickle down’, the CO noted the importance of ensuring that information about schools reached the sector level.

However, coordination was challenged by colleagues who did not want to meet face to face, and the subsequent challenges of team building and ‘on-boarding’ junior team members. During this time UNICEF employees and their partners in other organisations were struggling to maintain their work–life balance, and mental health issues such as stress and burn-out were pronounced.

Challenges

A central challenge that UNICEF faced during this period was uncertainty regarding how long the pandemic would last. As an UNICEF CO interviewee recounted: ‘we thought it was an emergency thing – quick and dirty. We should have done long-term planning’. In this regard, UNICEF was often engaged in emergency response rather than strategizing.

The emergency response versus strategizing tension was also reflected in UNICEF’s funding structures. The UNICEF CO interviewee explained that ‘they give us six to 12 months to spend money, but in a pandemic situation we can’t do that… you really need to plan and these things take time’. For example, the EdTech strategy funding finishes in December, and there is little flexibility to extend this funding. However, the project is unlikely to be finished by this time since developing strategy is a long-term process.

The CSO which received funding from UNICEF reported similar challenges. The short-term nature of its funding meant that it was challenging to retain talented staff. The time taken to apply for funding, and then recruit and train new staff, distracted attention away from its main work. Furthermore, the lack of a budget line for ‘overheads’ meant that the CSO was less flexible in its response, due to the project-based nature of the funding it received from UNICEF.

A further challenge that UNICEF faced was collaborating with MoNE on specific campaign or advocacy issues, such as the reopening of schools. This collaboration was not possible due to political challenges associated with partnering with one arm of government to pressurise another arm of government. However, it also meant that UNICEF felt ineffective in regard to large advocacy aims, such as reopening schools.

Interviewees reported challenges relating to the coordination of different aspects of UNICEF’s work, given the large size of the Turkey CO. Although the CO had weekly cross-sectorial team meetings, the CSO reported that the various UNICEF projects it engaged with often did not communicate with each other. Similarly, a UNICEF representative suggested that partner coordination could have been improved – although interaction with partners was continuous, the sharing of plans and experiences could have been coordinated in a more systematic way. This might have enhanced learning across various interventions.

Lessons learned

Interviewees noted several important lessons that were learned from UNICEF’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey.

An obvious lesson learned during the COVID-19 pandemic was the need for greater digitalisation of the education system in Turkey. It is hoped that the EdTech strategy that is currently being developed will not only ensure that learning becomes more dynamic, but will also ensure that young people in Turkey have better digital skills. The need to equip young people with digital skills is particularly urgent given that Turkey has a young population and youth unemployment may prove a threat to national security.

Perhaps the most important lesson learned was the need for forward planning and being proactive. As one interviewee noted: ‘this thing of the digital learning and technology, we’ve known about for many decades and never had the chance or willingness to start investing in it’. While EBA provided Turkey with a great start in regard to distance learning, had resources been invested in digital learning prior to COVID-19 the pandemic might have had less impact on learning loss.

In regard to forward planning, issues relating to climate change were identified as being of particular significance. One interviewee suggested that climate change should be incorporated into teacher training, because ‘we need a critical mass that is able to understand and deal with these new emergencies which are no longer conflicts or wars; they are environmental and economic crises’.

Interviewees noted the importance of strengthening assessment systems for future crises. Given that Turkey has not been able to quantify learning loss, there are limited opportunities to develop future education strategies.

The success of the online teacher training programmes – including their cost-effectiveness – suggested that this could be an approach that is replicated even after COVID-19. Already, UNICEF is considering training that could be provided for next summer, and which might address new topics with more in-depth learning: for example, teaching children with disabilities. In particular, the success of the psychosocial training for teachers indicated to the UNICEF CO that despite being a ‘traditional’ country Turkey is increasingly seeing the value of equipping teachers with skills relating to mental health.

Turkey country-specific recommendations

* UNICEF Turkey should consider how resources invested during COVID-19 (e.g. EBA centres) can result in the greatest long-term impact post-COVID-19.
* UNICEF Turkey should increase its focus on children with disabilities during the COVID-19 recovery period.
* UNICEF Turkey should consider the impact that COVID-19 has had on the mental health of its staff, and put care strategies in place.
* UNICEF Turkey should consider the impact of short-term funding contracts on the ability of its CSO partners to work effectively, and make changes accordingly.
* UNICEF Turkey should consider providing support for refugees in languages other than Arabic.
* UNICEF Turkey should focus on improving coordinated communication with CSOs who engage with multiple UNICEF teams.

1. Serbia country-specific assessment
   1. Main areas of response

Continuity of learning

#### Bridging the digital divide

Results from the data collection initiatives conducted by MoESTD, UNICEF, and the University of Belgrade (Faculty of Philosophy) indicated the extent of the digital divide in Serbia and addressing the digital divide therefore became a priority for UNICEF throughout the pandemic. This work was largely funded by the EU.

In particular, the data indicated that in some low-income municipalities children did not have sufficient devices to access distance learning. With this information UNICEF was able to leverage the EU to provide immediate support, and to negotiate public–private partnerships, – for example, with Telenor. This support enabled the establishment of ‘tech libraries’ where children can borrow devices, as well as SIM cards for these devices, so that children can have internet connectivity at home. At the moment these services are limited to 30 low-income schools; however, it is hoped that this will soon be expanded.

Data collection and monitoring

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic UNICEF was heavily involved in the collection and monitoring of education data. Following school closures, one of the first activities was a large-scale study of access to distance learning, particularly among vulnerable groups. 97% of principals responded to this study, which was analysed by the UNICEF team in collaboration with MoESTD and university researchers. The study highlighted the large digital divide that existed in Serbia at that time. It not only identified a lack of devices, but also a lack of digital competencies, particularly among teachers. Furthermore, the quality of learning materials was found to be unclear. The study indicated that 17% of Roma primary school students, 9% of Roma secondary school students, 4% of primary school students with disabilities, 3% of secondary students with disabilities, 6% of primary school students from other vulnerable groups, and 33% of secondary school students from other vulnerable groups did not participate in distance learning in any form. Psychosocial support was provided to more than 25% of Roma students and families, 24% of children with disabilities and their families, and 16% of students and families from other vulnerable groups.

A further household study – conducted in partnership with Ipsos – collected data including the number of hours children were learning online, the perceptions of parents regarding children’s progress, as well as an RTA of the attitudes of students who were over 15 years old. Again, the study found a need to focus on the most vulnerable children who were found to lack parental and extracurricular support.

UNICEF’s support to data collection and monitoring during the pandemic was threefold. Interviewees reported that the questionnaires used by MoESTD were often not relevant or user friendly. UNICEF’s ability to hire monitoring and evaluation consultants improved the quality of the data collection. UNICEF was involved in shaping the indicators of quality in order to develop better tools for monitoring digital learning. An interviewee explained that Serbia already has indicators of quality education in general, but UNICEF is preparing additional indicators to help monitor the digital divide and the extent to which teachers are improving their digital competencies. This is in part supported by Serbia’s involvement in the EU pilot project ‘SELFIE’, which is a tool that schools can use to assess where they stand with learning in the digital age. This tool enabled comparisons between Serbia and other EU countries. Lastly, UNICEF was experienced in advocacy, decision-making, and stakeholder communication using data. It was able to draw on this skill to justify programming and conduct fundraising.

Teacher support

#### Teacher training

According to the MoESTD representatives, ‘the biggest focus of UNICEF during this period is strengthening the competencies of teachers and this is where UNICEF helped us the most’. In large part UNICEF supported teachers in regard to digital learning. In this regard Serbia had a head start, since digital education became a national priority in 2016. There had therefore been large movements in the education system towards digitalisation prior to the pandemic. For example, the MoESTD had already invested in digital competencies, and had made some investments in digital textbooks.

In 2017 UNICEF had established a national education platform for teachers, which was similar to TeacherNet in English-speaking countries. However, since most Serbian teachers do not speak English, and therefore could not access these global resources, a Serbian teachers’ portal was established. Prior to the pandemic this portal had modest ambitions, with some self-directed programmes. However, during the pandemic the entire teacher training programme went online using this platform, and trained more than 52,000 teachers. Furthermore, the data from this education platform suggest that there are 163,000 trainings currently ongoing, suggesting that each teacher is attending at least two trainings. According to the MoESTD: ‘this would not have been possible without UNICEF’s support’. As one UNICEF CO interviewee noted:

‘*One of the biggest issues was that we wanted the project to result in the existence of a national online platform for learning, and the other was the existence of open source digital resources that teachers can use, and we wanted to tackle the issue of the digital divide of the most deprived municipalities, and we wanted to boost competencies of teachers for online pedagogies but also competencies of psychologists and pedagogues on resilience and psychosocial support*.’

As mentioned above, UNICEF is currently addressing the issue of quality in digital education, and considering the competencies that teachers will require in order to teach online. UNICEF is developing a module for teachers regarding pedagogical techniques that they require in order to accommodate the online format. One interviewee noted: ‘I believe we will be able to advocate for some big changes in initial teacher education – this is something we are working on with the ministry’. The deficiencies in respect of teachers’ pedagogical competencies have become apparent during COVID-19, and as a result policymakers recognise the need for different types of CPD courses. ‘What is important for UNICEF’, suggested one interviewee, ‘is to go to the top quality and set the standard’.

#### Psychosocial support programmes

Alongside teacher training UNICEF supported an online peer network for school psychologists and pedagogues relating to psychosocial support. The aim of the project – entitled ‘Support to associates in school for pedagogues and psychologists under difficult circumstances with distance learning’ – was not only to support student learning but also to offer a holistic approach to children that would enable schools to reach the most vulnerable families. The purpose, as one interviewee described, was ‘for strengthening and empowering the professional associates in school for everything that came upon us’.

The online network included different materials, such as videos, tutorials, and webinars, published twice a month. The website materials received 20,000 visits, and the webinars attracted around 1,000 professional associates from all across Serbia. Interestingly, the webinars were not only joined by professional associates, but also preschool teachers, suggesting a desire for greater support in this area.

Partner coordination

Interestingly, interviewees rejected the notion that UNICEF was engaged in partner coordination in Serbia. Rather, they described UNICEF as a ‘connective tissue, connecting all stakeholders’ and as ‘a glue that brought some pieces together’. This can be explained by the fact that MoESTD was leading the COVID-19 education response. The MoESTD even claimed that ‘UNICEF maybe had the best insight into this situation’, since the MoESTD itself had systematic limitations that meant it could not consider every aspect. UNICEF had an ambitious oversight of the education sector and could identify where there was a ‘missing link’ or a gap that needed to be bridged. For example, the fact that UNICEF worked in multiple sectors and with multiple stakeholders meant that it could introduce relevant stakeholders to each other.

* 1. Assessment of UNICEF’s response

Effectiveness and relevance

All interviewees were very positive about the effectiveness and relevance of UNICEF Serbia’s education response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This effectiveness and relevance was evidenced by the number of teachers, psychologists, and families who used its services, as well as the programmes that were able to be implemented as a result of UNICEF’s support.

There are several reasons for the effectiveness of UNICEF’s response.

The first is the fact that UNICEF had already been advocating for digital education prior to the pandemic, and therefore had some experience in establishing digital networks and online training. Digital education had already been established as a priority for the MoESTD. One MoESTD representative explained that ‘UNICEF was planning digitalisation of education even before the pandemic so they are visionaries because they recognised the importance of business learning and they have great cooperation with IT companies, and they are really trying to make it quick and of high quality’. Interestingly, UNICEF had organised a trip for the MoESTD to Brussels where there was a training, especially tailored for Serbia, about online learning, four months before the pandemic. In part, UNICEF’s foresight in regard to digital education reflects the Serbian CO’s interest in ‘reform projects’. As one interviewee from the CO stated: ‘everything we do is something that has reform potential’.

The second reason for the effectiveness of UNICEF’s response is the partnerships that UNICEF had developed with organisations outside of Serbia, particularly the Delegation of the EU in Serbia, prior to the pandemic. When schools closed, UNICEF was able to leverage significant funding from these partners to support impressive systems-level change, and also to develop new partnerships (e.g. EU, Akelius Foundation). For example, in the last 10 years UNICEF Serbia has received EUR 18 million from the EU; however, in the last two years for education alone UNICEF has received more than EUR seven million for education. These funds will help all municipalities which are currently not connected to any type of internet inside or outside of schools to get connected, and will thus be at the forefront of pushing the connectivity agenda. As one UNICEF CO interviewee stated: ‘there are big expectations from what we deliver, so I think these new partnerships also help the CO to increase the capacities of the education sector’.

The third reason for the effectiveness of UNICEF’s response is the excellent working relationship that UNICEF enjoyed with the MoESTD, and the fact that UNICEF is so trusted by the MoESTD. A UNICEF CO interviewee explained:

‘*We had one session with the previous representative on lessons learned from COVID-19 and the biggest impression was how close we cooperate with government, in terms that we were really their go-to partner and sometimes especially when the pandemic started I felt we were part of the same team*.’

She went on to explain:

‘*In our job you have to nurture these partnerships if you want to be a partner in these very critical situations. Everything we have invested before COVID paid off during COVID*.’

Indeed, the strong relationship with the MoESTD made other partnerships possible, since UNICEF could not access many of the donors if they were not recommended by the line ministry or if they were not part of the work plan signed by the ministry. As a CSO interviewee explained: ‘UNICEF will never realise any project that we are working on without the support of the ministry’, since the official partnership with the ministry allowed UNICEF to access EU funds. This reflects the mutually supportive relationship between the MoESTD and UNICEF

From the MoESTD’s perspective, UNICEF’s credibility and expertise were highly valued, as was as their approach of not criticising the MoESTD or politicising the education system. Whenever the MoESTD had a problem, they would turn to UNICEF, who they said was always able to help; ‘*when UNICEF plan their own activities they first consider our needs and plan activities accordingly so they can help us with our needs*’. For example, when the MoESTD was developing their new education strategy, UNICEF was consulted and almost everything that UNICEF proposed entered the strategy.

The fourth reason for the effectiveness of UNICEF’s response is the significant amount of fundraising that the UNICEF team was able to achieve. The Serbian CO has a private sector fundraising team and in 2020 they exceeded their fundraising goals by 100%. Such momentum and commitment from private and public sector partners meant that UNICEF was immediately able to offer support in the form of ventilators etc. This in turn reinforced the sense that UNICEF was the main partner of the MoESTD, giving huge visibility to the UNICEF team and thus bringing in further financial support.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic started, UNICEF already had an approved concept of an EU-funded project on inclusive education (over EUR 5 million), which was fully negotiated with the Serbian Government. When the pandemic started, negotiation of this project was put on hold, and instead UNICEF negotiated to use some left-over funding from the EU Education sector-budget to support the ministry throughout the COVID-19 response. This negotiation started in May 2020, and the project Prevention of Digital Divide started in November 2020. In the meantime, all activities were paid and financed through education thematic funds.

Flexibility and adaptability

UNICEF’s flexibility and adaptability during this period was a significant strength which enabled it to programme activities for a quickly changing situation. This contrasted with the MoESTD, which often struggled to adapt due to administrative hurdles.

Within months of the COVID-19 pandemic UNICEF had reprogrammed its activities and had begun fundraising to meet the related costs. Between April and July 2020, for example, it collected household data on student learning experiences, which then informed larger projects throughout the pandemic. This data-driven approach to understanding what UNICEF’s response should be in a fast-changing situation represented an impressive level of flexibility. As one interviewee explained: ‘it was a good collaboration with partners who were quick to change approach and the ministry who were willing to shift modalities not only of children’s education but also capacity building of professionals who were involved in providing learning activities’.

An example of UNICEF’s funding flexibility was at the beginning of the pandemic when the MoESTD needed to buy software so that teachers could record lessons that were broadcast on national television. The MoESTD was not able to purchase this software due to complex bureaucratic procedures and so UNICEF stepped in to pay for the software. Another example was uploading teaching content on the MySchool platform. This was a complex process since the teaching and learning content was different for each course, and the national broadcasting service could not support all the materials on one platform. UNICEF was able to purchase an annual subscription to a service which allowed it to upload the materials quickly. A third example was UNICEF’s support in the form of the provision of laptops to teachers who were working from home, thus enabling them to deliver their lessons from home. As an MoESTD representative explained: ‘these may seem like smaller activities where not a lot of money was needed but they were timely and were provided exactly when the country needed help’.

UNICEF’s ability to adapt during this period was attributed to several factors:

* In part, the ‘great energy in the country’ and the momentum that generated meant that fundraising efforts were very successful. This allowed UNICEF to quickly adapt existing initiatives.
* A second factor was UNICEF’s experience with emergency situations (e.g. the Syrian migrant crisis), which led CSO partners to describe its response to COVID-19 as ‘natural’.
* Lastly, stakeholders attributed the speed of UNICEF’s response to its extensive partner network, including research institutes, universities, NGOs, and professional associations. UNICEF is a trusted and credible partner, and these networks built over many years were easy to mobilise quickly.

However, the flexibility did at times add strain on partners. While the CSO interviewees acknowledged the value of having developmental and participatory projects – which unlike other projects did not have predefined activities and no room for adaptation – this meant that some elements of the projects remained vague: ‘on the one side it’s good because we can observe what is good and what should be done differently… but on the other hand it brings a kind of uncertainty’. This may be due to the nature of EU-funded projects in which UNICEF is the implementing partner and NGOs are invited to support the implementation after projects have already been adopted.

Equity

UNICEF’s initial data collection phase between April and July 2020 clearly identified the groups of children who were unable to participate in digital learning. The three groups that were identified were Roma children, poor children, refugee children, and children with disabilities.

In regard to refugee children, UNICEF worked with NGO partners and government to offer learning support in refugee and migrant camps. The idea of EdTech libraries where students could borrow digital devices was first implemented in refugee camps, with the help of selected teachers and student volunteers who provided online learning support programmes and English courses. While last year these students were able to attend school online, this year they have been able to attend school face-to-face.

The education of children with disabilities was a particular challenge during COVID-19. The MoESTD said that children with disabilities should have face-to-face classes; however, teachers from ‘special schools’ who worked with disabled children protested. UNICEF was engaged in initiating conversations with special schools and bringing together stakeholders to understand their concerns and come to a resolution. Since that time a project has been initiated which helps teachers to work with children with disabilities online. On 1 June 2021, UNICEF also signed another project on inclusive education with the EU, under which EUR 5.5 million has been granted to support children with disabilities through the establishment of resource centres which will combine the digitalisation agenda and the inclusion agenda.

The data collection identified 30 primary schools which have a large Roma population. These schools received special support from UNICEF since they were supporting Roma children who could otherwise not connect online. Each school received 43 tablet computers and two laptops, while all teachers received training for digital competence, remote and online teaching, and psychosocial support. All 30 schools will furthermore receive EUR 5,000 each to organise homework clubs. While this initiative reaches a limited number of schools UNICEF’s hope is that promoting EdTech libraries will act as a catalyst so that other partners and private sector actors can support schools in terms of IT equipment and internet.

Challenges

A challenge experienced by the UNICEF education team during this period was a lack of data on learning outcomes and school attendance. While remedial learning is officially the responsibility of schools, no remedial learning was implemented in the first months of the pandemic, when the entire system went online. Instead, access to digital learning was relied upon to understand potential learning shortfalls.

A second challenge was developing training for teachers aimed at developing their digital competencies. Similarly, the regular curriculum was not developed for online learning, and so although some schools prior to the pandemic might have experimented with online learning, this was different when online became the main mode of curriculum delivery. This posed challenges when trying to monitor the quality of teaching online, since it was not clear what teachers should have been doing. Similarly, there were no tools to monitor the quality of online learning, as there are for monitoring in-class teaching (such as observation tools and self-reflection lists etc.)

A third challenge was the frequent political and technical changes within the Serbian MoESTD. The UNICEF CO explained that this was not easy ‘because people are changing and you don’t know all of them so you need to build partnerships from the beginning’. Fortunately, however, during the COVID-19 pandemic the political situation was stable and did not affect the CO’s work.

A fourth challenge was the coordination of partners throughout projects that have flexible or developing goals. For example, in regard to developing online learning communities for preschool teachers, UNICEF sought to develop a global partnership with Microsoft regarding use of its Learning Passport programme. However, it was difficult to reach a consensus in the country between relevant public education institutions and the academic community in regard to what needed to be done in relation to the digital competencies of preschool teachers: ‘there are 10 people and everyone has their own view’, which means that the consultation process takes time.

A fifth challenge, noted by the CSO, was the lack of UNICEF human resources, which at times delayed projects. She said: ‘all our colleagues from UNICEF are always very busy. They have so many projects and meetings so I think they don’t have time to go through some of the outputs or questions when we need them to’. At times this lack of human resources was compensated for by hiring consultants; however, the CSO believes that dedicated and consistent staff were often required.

Lessons learned

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly progressed UNICEF’s digital education agenda[[16]](#footnote-17). As the UNICEF CO interviewee explained:

‘*The digitalisation and COVID-19 response somehow helped us to think wider and out of the box and to be very critical of how we can help people and how we can use other hybrid teaching, what we know about adult learning, what we can utilise, how we can replace face-to-face by using videos. It had a great impact on the quality of teacher education. The speed of changes in professional development was due to COVID-19 and these efforts in digitalisation would normally need 20 years but needed just 1.5 years. This is valid for UNICEF and how UNICEF works*.’

The rapid digitalisation of the education system led interviewees to draw several lessons for the future of education in Serbia.

The first lesson is that rapid change within the education sector is possible, and that partners are capable of working together to implement system-wide change in short periods of time when required. For many of those interviewed, this challenges ideas regarding how long change usually takes.

On the other hand, those interviewed also recognised the toll that this rapid digitalisation had taken on the wellbeing of many families. Polls and surveys indicated that the mental wellbeing of children had deteriorated, and parents felt that they were not adequately able to support their children. As a result, both face-to-face interactions and psychosocial support need to be in place.

A major lesson learned during this period was the need to reform the professional development of teachers. In part this is due to the digitalisation of education, which has helped partners to reflect on how face-to-face time in the classroom is being used. During this time, education stakeholders started to talk about the quality of professional development and how it can be improved. As one interviewee noted: ‘I think that what would be our target for the next continual professional development would be to do the reform of professional development of teachers because this is something that will actually influence education quality in the country’.

Lastly, a recommendation from the CSO interviewee was to encourage UNICEF to train CSOs and municipalities to organise and advocate better for local education action plans. This interviewee suggested that those working with schools, children, and families could sometimes ‘lack the strength to finish what we started’. Increased training for system reform at a local level could help to decentralise UNICEF’s activities.

Serbia country-specific recommendations

* UNICEF Serbia should support the re-design of initial teacher education programmes so that they include a focus on digital and student-centred pedagogies.
* UNICEF Serbia should consider hiring more CO staff who retain institutional memory, rather than short-term consultants.
* UNICEF Serbia should increase its engagement at the municipality level, in addition to central government.
* UNICEF Serbia should consider training CSOs and municipalities so that they can better organise and advocate for local education plans.

1. BiH country-specific assessment
   1. Main areas of response

Data collection and management

The UNICEF CO in BiH saw its role primarily in terms of system support for the education sector. In this regard, data collection and management, which could then inform policy, was very central to its work.

When the first lockdown took place in March 2020 UNICEF conducted an RNA, which helped to identify the most marginalised children. UNICEF BiH designed and distributed the RNA questionnaire to 12 education authorities as an initial step in mapping the need for immediate action and support. This assessment was done twice – once in April and a second time in June – in order to ‘take stock’ of what had been achieved so far. Both studies were done in-house, given the speed at which the assessments needed to take place.

These RNAs proved to be very helpful given that the MoEs did not have data on marginalised groups. The data estimated that more than 9,700 children did not have access to the ICT devices needed to participate in the online classes. However, this number decreased by 50% between April and August 2020. The Phase 2 RNA reported that at least 6% of the total number of children without access were Roma (286) and 1% (50) were children with disabilities. For children without access to digital learning, teachers printed materials which parents collected, and at times teachers gave instructions over the phone. Simple communication platforms, such as Viber, were used frequently, but Google Classroom and MS Office were used less frequently, suggesting that many teachers and students did not make full use of the available ICT resources.

In addition, the UNICEF CO conducted a social impact assessment of COVID-19 with UNDP. This assessment involved a desk review of the existing resources, an assessment of the impact that the mitigation activities that were implemented by the Government in BiH had on people, as well as household surveys which collected quantitative and qualitative data in order to assess the vulnerabilities, risks, strengths, and coping strategies of people, households, and society.

The data from this study indicated that the crisis had a significant impact on people’s mental health (experienced significantly more among women), and that the closure of schools and colleges affected 41% of households. The results from the interviews showed that the three top-most problems that respondents encountered in the online education delivery method were the lower quality of interaction with teachers via the internet (31%), greater disorganisation compared to teaching in classrooms (24%), and technical problems associated with online platforms (23%). These were very robust data that the CO then was able to use for advocacy regarding opening up schools and other related policies. A significant problem was found in households with children and youth under the age of 18 (21%) in the form of the inability of parents (because of their lack of time and/or knowledge) to help their children understand the lectures. As expected, this most prominently affected respondents in the age group 31–50 (20%), as many had to work from home and had insufficient time to help their children with their online schooling. Vulnerable groups reported poorer quality of interaction with teachers (26%) and technical problems with the online platforms.

The CO during this time was also responding to multiple requests for data, particularly from UNICEF Headquarters. This often required a lot of work to collect the data that were being requested. These requests corresponded with an unfolding refugee influx which the UNICEF CO also had to report on. The CO acknowledged that this was overwhelming at times, and eventually it changed its reporting cycle to once a month rather than weekly.

Continuity of learning

A range of activities were facilitated by the CO to support continuity of learning, particularly at the beginning of the lockdown. This work was supported by US$ 70,000 that was received from UNICEF’s thematic funds.

The needs in regard to continuity of learning were different for each canton. UNICEF began by bilaterally approaching each MoE to ask them what they required. In Sarajevo, for example, the schools and students were well equipped with digital devices and internet access; however, they requested webinars to train teachers on how to use digital devices. MoEs in cantons other than Sarajevo required internet connectivity and requested that UNICEF help them to negotiate with an internet provider so that students could access the internet until the end of the school year. At times UNICEF transferred funds directly to the MoEs to help them leverage whatever plans they had. At other times UNICEF paid directly for services, or gave cash transfers to schools so that they could buy supplies.

In terms of longer-term support for continuity of learning, UNICEF is now piloting an assistive technology project that aims to strengthen inclusive education. This project is a package of devices and support for schools. A feasibility study for this project will be conducted in the next couple of months, in order to develop policy recommendations. The study will be led by the World Health Organization (WHO), with support from UNICEF’s regional offices, and will reflect on what has been learned over the pandemic period.

#### Standardising devices

While supporting the MoEs in procuring digital devices and internet connection, UNICEF recognised that there were important gaps in the regulation of digital learning for schools. The government was required to change its laws overnight because there was no legal provision for online education. However, there was also no standard for the quality or type of digital devices. This meant that while many different donors were giving equipment to schools, in many cases the devices were not being used because the schools did not have the infrastructure to support them, or because the devices were not adequate for the schools’ needs. Equally, the MoEs did not understand what was required: at one point they asked for schools to be provided with tablets, but then asked for laptops once they realised that tablets were not convenient for learning. Equally, teachers were using Viber or WhatsApp groups for communication and for receiving information from the MoE; however, these unofficial channels resulted in information gaps.

UNICEF therefore started a process of standardising the digital devices and infrastructure that schools require for digital and online learning. This standard for equipment and internet is currently being finalised and will be presented to a technical board, after which the process of developing guidelines for blended learning will start. According to the UNICEF CO: ‘the development of the guidelines for blended learning is a strategic document that will be given to the MoEs because there is no common understanding of what is meant by blended learning and different modalities’.

Teacher support

In response to MoEs’ requests for teacher support, 20 webinars were organised, which reached 2,600 teachers. These webinars started at 6pm in the evening, and included a range of different topics, such as how to use Google Classrooms, digital competencies, sharing good practices, and mental health training. The content design was outsourced, so that the MoEs provided relevant experts from universities or private companies, while UNICEF provided some content from regional offices on different open education resources that exist and how to safely reopen schools.

Interestingly, these teacher webinars seemed to have an important effect on social cohesion and teacher solidarity in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. Teachers often shared the webinar links with their friends, so teachers from across Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia also began to attend.

Evaluation of these webinars was not conducted in the normal way due to the necessarily quick roll-out of the project. However, the Sarajevo MoE presented an online catalogue of good teaching practices from during the school closures. According to a UNICEF CO interviewee, the teachers said ‘this is the first time that we have been recognised in this way by the Ministry of Education’, suggesting that this was not only important for teacher training, but also for teachers’ morale during this period.

Given the success of the teacher training webinars, UNICEF has decided to continue delivering them, and thus is continuing to offer opportunities for the professional development of teachers. The next stage, however, will be to robustly evaluate these webinars. This will begin by establishing a baseline and assessing the professional development needs of teachers using two reference frameworks: UNESCO’s framework on teachers’ competencies, and the EU’s digital framework. Based on these frameworks, UNICEF intends to interview teachers, parents, and students from a representative number of schools. Once the gaps in regard to pedagogical competencies have been identified, UNICEF intends to develop and design training programmes to address the different gaps, offer these trainings to teachers based on their needs, and then evaluate the impact of this training.

As well as the webinar CPD, the Department of Pedagogy – supported by UNICEF – is providing online trainings for all new teachers and members of mobile teams who are employed to support children with disabilities in schools. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these trainings are very useful for teachers.

Safe school reopening

The summer break gave BiH the opportunity to think about the safe reopening of schools. The UNICEF CO described these efforts as ‘intensive’. Together with UNESCO and the head of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, UNICEF organised a meeting in August to share translated guidelines for the safe reopening of schools. All MoEs attended this meeting where they were advised on the importance of school reopening and the need to have plans in place to open schools safely.

UNICEF also supplied a hygiene kit to every school in the country, as well as printed posters communicating the COVID-19 protection measures that they received through the global advocacy toolkit. While distributing these hygiene supplies was not the kind of long-term strategic plan that UNICEF usually prioritises, the Government did not have the budget to support such efforts. It is UNICEF’s intention that it will phase out this support once the Government has properly budgeted for hygiene supplies. UNICEF CO interviewees considered these efforts to be very successful, since schools have fully reopened, and the Government is now much better prepared to maintain COVID-secure schools.

Sector coordination

UNICEF has been involved in multiple education partnerships and ongoing coordinating groups, with the international community, donors, agencies, and the Government.

According to the UNICEF CO, the education partnerships with the international community and donors have been a challenge. Although education needs are identified by UNICEF, donors seem unwilling to coordinate in their response. As the UNICEF CO interviewee commented:

‘*We were talking to ourselves. They do not understand the importance of coordination. We also had an attempt to develop a matrix of who wants to support in which areas, and it was not a successful exercise. They just work. Whenever they get some money, they ask when they can donate something. We tried our best to coordinate, we were very transparent in our plan and what we wanted to achieve, and a concept note for education was sent to all embassies regarding what the United Nations needs, gaps in the United Nations. But there was hardly any response*.’

Despite these challenges, a few successes have emerged. USAID, for example, approached UNICEF and invited it to be its partner of choice in education. This was surprising to the UNICEF CO team, given that they have not had a relationship with USAID in regard to education for a long time. This USAID project has provided the funding catalyst to work on a programme of activities with all the MoEs.

Another success identified was the increased intensity with which different government partners were working together. For example, the Ministry of Civil Affairs – which was central in managing the COVID-19 response – had not met with the MoEs for a year, but they met for the first time in August 2020 due to the need to discuss school reopening.

The partnership with the Government was considered very effective by the UNICEF CO. When asked why this partnership was so effective, the CO responded that it was due to UNICEF’s long-term presence: the fact that UNICEF is ‘here to stay’ and because ‘we are partners here for a very long time’. This longevity means that UNICEF understands the political realities of the country and how coordination works between the different administrative units of government. The ability to work across different units, and ensuring that everyone was informed about what was being done, was an important aspect of partnership coordination, even if UNICEF did not play a traditional leadership role.

* 1. Assessment of UNICEF’s response

Effectiveness and relevance

Given BiH UNICEF’s systems approach to education support, the effectiveness of its work was not always immediately or clearly identified.

Perhaps one indication of its effectiveness was the extent to which education was prioritised in BiH during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the UNICEF CO explained:

‘*This is the first time I’ve seen how quickly education is put in the centre of a crisis from an organisational point of view. It came as fast as health, if not faster. The WHO took a role in the health response and we supported, but education became the centre of UNICEF’s work, and that aspired at a country level as well. It became one of our major interventions to support continuity of learning*.’

During regular presentations to the international community, for example, UNICEF was given space to discuss the data from the RNA, and future education plans. In co-chairing with the UNDP task force, UNICEF established a dedicated group for education, which ensured that it was a critical area.

A second indication of its effectiveness was UNICEF’s ability to secure funding for the education response both from the United Nations Secretary General and USAID. This funding provided ‘solid ground’ upon which to strengthen the education sector at a systems level, and enabled the UNICEF CO education team to triple in size. As the UNICEF CO explained: ‘one thing we ensured is that we don’t work on projects. Whatever we do is for the government, for strengthening institutions and strengthening systems, so we leave a legacy and the government can take over. We are thinking about the exit strategy from the very beginning’.

The areas where the CO did directly intervene proved successful. For example, the distribution of hygiene supplies reached every school in the country, and in part thanks to UNICEF’s advocacy the schools remained open. Although the teacher training webinars have not been formally evaluated, anecdotal evidence suggests that teachers found them relevant, so much so that they invited colleagues from neighbouring countries to attend.

Adaptability and flexibility

UNICEF was able to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic very quickly, by conducting an RNA which produced data that helped inform policy.

In part this adaptability was due to the support that was provided by UNICEF Headquarters. The Chief of Education in New York utilised the online modality to organise a global education team meeting with hundreds of UNICEF colleagues from all over the world. This enabled the UNICEF CO to receive information and share experience in real time, as well as to ask for assistance. Within two weeks thematic funds were made available to the CO.

A regional sub-group was also organised among countries that spoke the same or similar languages. This sub-group divided the translation of the international guidance in order that it could be distributed more quickly.

The BiH Government also proved very adaptable during this period. It changed the law ‘overnight’ to support online learning, and provided a lot of support to improving learning platforms, adding open educational resources, and providing professional development for teachers in a more systematic manner. A lesson from this period according to the UNICEF CO was that ‘things can happen much faster than before’.

Equity and inclusivity

At a systems level, equity and inclusivity were very high priorities for the UNICEF CO: ‘keeping in mind the most marginalised children… this is what helps us decide regions and schools we want to support’. The CO explained that ‘we do not have much direct intervention but our main role is policy advocacy, strengthening systems even during this crisis period’. This perhaps explains why relatively little direct assistance was given to marginalised groups by UNICEF. However, the intended impact may be felt when national policies better serve marginalised groups.

Prior to COVID-19, OECD PISA data suggested that BiH was suffering from a learning crisis, and so there was a reasonable assumption on behalf of UNICEF that COVID-19 would have a further impact on the learning of those children who were already most marginalised. However, as the UNICEF CO explained: ‘for different vulnerable groups it was a different experience’.

In regard to Roma children and children with disabilities, a significant challenge was assessing the extent to which they were engaging in learning. UNICEF received reports that learning materials had been printed and sent to Roma households, however there was no evidence of how much they were learning.

Schools that served children with disabilities were kept open during the lockdown. However, for children with disabilities that did not attend these schools, it was not known who was working with those children at home and what kinds of learning materials they were using.

Ironically, given the extent of their vulnerability, children on the move had continuous access to education. UNICEF worked with its partners, who were able to organise online classes for these children in camps, with the support of mediators. As the CO explained: ‘children on the move are together and in collective accommodation so they had an advantage because they were given non-formal education opportunities like language learning or other non-formal education’.

In regard to gender, data collected by UNICEF did not identify any differences between male and female students. However, the UNICEF CO argued that gender sensitivity was required in regard to teachers, over 70% of whom are female. Female teachers had to manage family lives with children studying from home, as well as grappling with their new role as digital teachers. The CO therefore argued that ‘we need to be sensitive about how we support these female teachers in terms of capacity building and psychosocial support’. She went on to say that ‘this element was not systematically addressed’.

Challenges

UNICEF faced several challenges during this period.

A systemic challenge was the lack of publicity that UNICEF received given the nature of the work that it does in BiH. As the UNICEF CO explained: ‘another agency gives five laptops and that gets so much publicity, but we are changing the curriculum, and no-one is there to open the curriculum’. This is a challenge in a competitive donor landscape where agencies are trying to receive recognition in order to increase funding. It underlines the importance of being able to appropriately publicise UNICEF’s work. In part this was achieved with the teacher training webinars, which included UNICEF’s logo alongside the MoE’s logo.

A second but related challenge was UNICEF’s ability to measure or evaluate its impact, particularly given that it supports system-wide reform rather than direct interventions. Donors are interested in seeing tangible and immediate results, whereas UNICEF’s results do not come overnight. Although during COVID-19 UNICEF BiH received sufficient funding, satisfying donors was a challenge.

A third challenge was collecting data on the learning experiences of children with disabilities, particularly those who did not attend school during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Lastly, UNICEF BiH struggled to coordinate partners effectively. While the BiH UNICEF CO did not itself understand why this was such a challenge, further investigation of the education partnership culture within BiH might assist UNICEF’s work and help strengthen the education sector within BiH.

BiH country-specific recommendations

* UNICEF BiH should evaluate why education stakeholders were reluctant to cooperate during the COVID-19 response. Evidence suggests that this was due to staff shortages, closure of ministry premises, and a heavy workload during COVID-19, however more information is needed, perhaps in the form of a stakeholder analysis.
* UNICEF BiH should support state-level authorities in education to improve coordination with competent MoEs and other education stakeholders.
* The decentralised context of education in BiH slowed down communication, since UNICEF was required to approach 14 MoEs rather than one. UNICEF BiH should consider how best to coordinate activities within a decentralised education context.
* UNICEF BiH should consider how it can better publicise its systemic work in the media.

1. Self-assessment of report’s compliance with UNICEF’s quality assurance checklist criteria

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Quality assurance checklist criteria | | Evaluation team's assessment of compliance with quality assurance checklist criteria |
| SECTION A: BACKGROUND (weight 5%) | | | |
| Question 1. | Is the object of the evaluation clearly described? | | Yes – in Section 4 |
| 1.1 | Clear and relevant description of the intervention, including: location(s), timelines, cost/budget, and implementation status. | | Yes. For the purpose of this study, the ‘intervention’ comprises the entire portfolio of COs' activities undertaken in response to the COVID-19 crisis in the education sector (primary and secondary education only). The report details the education response of UNICEF in ECAR throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including how these responses were implemented, how they were funded, their location, timelines, cost/budget and implementation status, as relevant throughout the report |
| 1.2 | Clear and relevant description of intended rights holders (beneficiaries) and duty bearers (state and non-state actors with responsibilities regarding the object of the evaluation) by type (i.e. institutions/organisations; communities; individuals…), by geographic location(s) (i.e. urban, rural, particular neighbourhoods, town/cites, subregions…) and in terms of numbers reached with disaggregation by gender, age, disability . . .(as appropriate to the purpose of the evaluation). | | Yes – throughout the report |
| Question 2. | Is the context of the intervention clearly described? | | Yes – in Section 3 |
| 2.1 | Clear and relevant description of the context of the object of the evaluation (i.e. relevant policy, socioeconomic, political, cultural, power/privilege, institutional, international factors) and how context relates to the implementation of the object of the evaluation. | | Relevant context described in Section 3 |
| 2.2 | Linkages are drawn to the SDGs and relevant targets and indicators for the area being evaluated. | | Yes – see introduction |
| 2.3 | Clear and relevant description (where appropriate) of the status and needs of the right holders/beneficiaries of the intervention. | | Yes – see introduction |
| Question 3. | Are key stakeholders, their relationships and contributions clearly identified? | | Not in detail |
| 3.1 | Identification of implementing agency(ies), development partners, rights holders, and additional duty bearers and other stakeholders; and of linkages between them (e.g. stakeholder map) (if relevant). | | Yes – see Section 2.5 |
| 3.2 | Identification of the specific contributions and roles of key stakeholders (financial or otherwise), including UNICEF. | | Yes – see Section 2.5 |
| SECTION B: EVALUATION PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES, AND SCOPE (weight 5%) | | | |
| Question 4. | Is the purpose of the evaluation clearly described? | | Yes |
| 4.1 | Specific identification of how the evaluation is intended to be used and what this use is expected to achieve. | | Yes – see introduction |
| 4.2 | Identification of appropriate primary intended users of the evaluation. | | Yes – see introduction |
| Question 5. | Are the objectives and scope of the evaluation clear and realistic? | | Yes |
| 5.1 | Clear and complete description of what the evaluation seeks to achieve by the end of the process with reference to any changes made to the objectives included in the terms of reference and/or in the inception report. | | Yes – see methodology |
| 5.2 | Clear and relevant description of the scope of the evaluation: what will and will not be covered (thematically, chronologically, geographically with key terms defined), as well as the reasons for this scope (e.g. specifications by the terms of reference and/or inception report, lack of access to particular geographic areas for political or safety reasons at the time of the evaluation, lack of data/evidence on particular elements of the intervention). | | Yes – see methodology |
| Question 6. | Is the theory of change, results chain, or logic well articulated? | | Yes – see methodology. The ToC was constructed by the evaluation team for analytical purposes, UNICEF COs’ results frameworks were not built around this ToC |
| 6.1 | Clear and complete description of the intervention's intended results or of the parts of the results chain that are applicable to, or are being tested by, the evaluation. | | Yes – see methodology |
| 6.2 | Causal relationship between outputs and outcomes is presented in narrative and graphic form (e.g. results chain, logic model, theory of change, evaluation matrix). | | Yes – see methodology |
| 6.3 | For theory-based evaluations, the theory of change or results framework is assessed, and if requested in the terms of reference, it is reformulated/improved by the evaluators. | | Yes – see methodology |
| SECTION C: EVALUATION METHODOLOGY (weight 20%) | |  | |
| Question 7. | Does the evaluation use questions and the relevant list of evaluation criteria that are explicitly justified as appropriate for the purpose of the evaluation? UNICEF evaluation standards refer to the OECD/DAC criteria. Not all OECD/DAC criteria are relevant to all evaluation objectives and scopes. Standard OECD DAC criteria include: relevance; effectiveness; efficiency; sustainability; impact. Evaluations should also consider equity, gender, and human rights (these can be mainstreamed into other criteria). Humanitarian evaluations should consider coverage; connectedness; coordination; protection; security. | | Evaluation questions and relevant evaluation criteria are used |
| 7.1 | Evaluation questions and sub-questions are appropriate for meeting the objectives and purpose of the evaluation and are aligned with the evaluation criteria. | | Yes – see Table 1 |
| 7.2 | In addition to the questions and sub-questions, the evaluation matrix includes indicators, benchmarks, assumptions, and/or other processes from which the analysis can be based and conclusions drawn. | | Yes – see Section 2.4 |
| Question 8. | Does the report specify methods for data collection, analysis, and sampling? | | Yes |
| 8.1 | Clear and complete description of a relevant and robust methodological design and set of data collection methods that are suitable for the evaluation's purpose, objectives, and scope. | | Yes – see methodology |
| 8.2 | Data sources are appropriate, normally including qualitative and quantitative sources (unless otherwise specified in the terms of reference), and are all clearly described. | | Yes – see methodology |
| 8.3 | Sampling strategy is provided, describing how diverse perspectives were captured (or if not, providing reasons for this). | | Yes – see methodology |
| 8.4 | Clear and complete description of data analysis methods. | | Yes – see methodology. |
| 8.5 | Methodology allows for drawing causal connections between outputs and expected outcomes. | | Yes – see methodology. However, given that this is a qualitative evaluation, causal connections are not the aim of the evaluation |
| 8.6 | Clear and complete description of evaluation limitations, biases, and constraints faced by the evaluation team, and mitigation strategies used. | | Yes – see methodology |
| Question 9. | Are ethical issues and considerations described? The evaluation should be guided by the UNEG ethical standards for evaluation and the 2015 UNICEF Procedure on Ethics to conduct Research, Studies, Evaluation. As such, the evaluation report should include: | | Yes |
| 9.1 | Explicit and contextualised reference to the obligations of evaluators (independence, impartiality, credibility, conflicts of interest, accountability) in accordance with UNEG ethical standards. | | Yes – see Section 2.7 |
| 9.2 | Description of ethical safeguards for participants appropriate for the issues described (respect for dignity and diversity, right to self-determination, fair representation, compliance with codes for vulnerable groups (i.e. adherence to ethical principles and procedure, do no harm, confidentiality and data collection)). For those cases where the evaluation involved interviewing children, explicit reference is made to the UNICEF procedures for Ethical Research Involving Children. | | Yes – see Section 2.7 |
| 9.3 | If the evaluation report required an official ethical approval and informed consent, both forms are included as an annex in the draft final evaluation report. | | No official ethical board approval was required. Informed consent was sought and received verbally. Letters outlining the purpose of the evaluation to participants are included in the annexes |
| SECTION D: EVALUATION FINDINGS (weight 25%) | |  | |
| Question 10. | Do the findings clearly address all evaluation objectives and scope? | | Yes – Section 5 is organised in line with the three assessment themes |
| 10.1 | Findings contain sufficient levels of evidence to systematically address all of the evaluation's criteria and questions. Gaps in evidence that was generated and mitigation of bias are highlighted if relevant. | | Yes – see Section 5 |
| 10.2 | If feasible and relevant to the purpose, cost analysis is clearly presented (how costs compare to similar interventions or standards, most efficient way to get expected results) – if not feasible, an explanation is provided. | | Yes – see Section 5 |
| 10.3 | Explicit use of the intervention's results framework/theory of change in the formulation of the findings. | | Yes – see Section 5 |
| Question 11. | Are evaluation findings derived from the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of the best available, objective, reliable, and valid data and by accurate quantitative and qualitative analysis of evidence? | | Yes |
| 11.1 | Evaluation uses credible forms of qualitative and quantitative data, presenting both output and outcome-level data as relevant to the evaluation framework. Triangulation is evident through the use of multiple data sources. | | Yes – see Section 5 |
| 11.2 | Findings are clearly supported by, and respond to, the evidence presented, including both positive and negative. Findings are based on clear performance indicators, standards, benchmarks, or other means of comparison as relevant for each question. | | Yes – see Section 5 |
| 11.3 | Unexpected effects (positive and negative) are identified and analysed. | | Yes – see Section 5 |
| 11.4 | The causal factors (contextual, organisational, managerial, etc.) leading to achievement or non-achievement of results are clearly identified. For theory-based evaluations, findings analyse the logical chain (progression – or not – from implementation to results). | | Yes – see Section 5 |
| Question 12. | Does the evaluation assess and use the intervention's results-based management elements? | | Yes |
| 12.1 | Clear and comprehensive assessment of the intervention's monitoring system (including completeness and appropriateness of results/performance framework – including vertical and horizontal logic; monitoring and evaluation tools and their usage) to support decision-making. | | Yes – see Section 5 |
| SECTION E: EVALUATION CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED (weight 10%) | | | |
| Question 13. | Do the conclusions present an objective overall assessment of the intervention? | | Yes |
| 13.1 | Conclusions are clearly formulated and reflect the purpose and objectives of the evaluation. They are sufficiently forward looking (if a formative evaluation or if the implementation is expected to continue or have an additional phase). | | Yes – see Section 6 |
| 13.2 | Conclusions are derived appropriately from findings, and present a picture of the strengths and limitations of the intervention that adds insight and analysis beyond the findings. | | Yes – see Section 6 |
| Question 14. | Are logical and informative lessons learned identified? [N/A if lessons are not presented and not requested in terms of reference.] | | Yes |
| 14.1 | Identified lessons stem logically from the findings, have wider applicability and relevance beyond the object of the evaluation. | | Yes – see Section 6 |
| 14.2 | Lessons are clearly and concisely presented, yet have sufficient detail to be useful for intended audience. | | Yes – see Section 6 |
| SECTION F: RECOMMENDATIONS (weight 15%) | | | |
| Question 15. | Are recommendations well-grounded in the evaluation? | | Yes |
| 15.1 | Recommendations align with the evaluation purpose, are clearly formulated and logically derived from the findings and/or conclusions. | | Yes |
| 15.2 | Recommendations are useful and actionable for primary intended users and uses (relevant to the intervention); guidance is given for implementation, as appropriate. | | Yes |
| 15.3 | Process for developing the recommendations is described, and includes the involvement of duty bearers, as well as rights holders when feasible (or explanation is given for why they were not involved). | | Yes – see Section 2.5 |
| Question 16. | Are recommendations clearly presented? | | Yes |
| 16.1 | Clear identification of groups or duty bearers responsible for action for each recommendation (or clearly clustered group of recommendations). Clear prioritisation and/or classification of recommendations to support use. | | Yes – see Section 6 |
| SECTION G: EVALUATION STRUCTURE/PRESENTATION (weight 5%) | |  | |
| Question 17. | Does the evaluation report include all relevant information? | | Yes |
| 17.1 | Opening pages include: Name of evaluated object, timeframe of the object evaluated, date of report, location of evaluated object, name(s) and/or organisation(s) of the evaluator(s), name of organisation commissioning the evaluation, table of contents – including, as relevant, tables, graphs, figures, annexes – list of acronyms/abbreviations, page numbers. | | Yes |
| 17.2 | Annexes include: terms of reference, evaluation matrix, list of interviewees, results chain/theory of change/logical framework (unless included in report body), list of site visits, data collection instruments (such as survey or interview questionnaires), list of documentary evidence. Other appropriate annexes could include: additional details on methodology, information about the evaluator(s). | | Yes – however, many of these are included in the body of the report |
| Question 18. | Is the report logically structured? | | Yes |
| 18.1 | Structure is easy to identify and navigate (for instance, with numbered sections, clear titles and sub-titles, well formatted). | | Yes |
| 18.2 | Structure follows UNICEF guidelines for evaluation reports: context, purpose, objectives, and methodology would normally precede findings, which would normally be followed by conclusions, lessons learned, and recommendations. | | Yes |
| 18.3 | Report is easy to understand (written in accessible way for intended audience) and generally free from grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. | | Yes |
| 18.4 | Frequent use of visual aids (such as infographics, maps, tables, figures, photos) to convey key information. These are clearly presented, labelled, and referenced in text. | | Yes |
| 18.5 | Report is of reasonable length; it does not exceed number of pages that may be specified in terms of reference. | | Yes |
| SECTION H: EVALUATION PRINCIPLES (weight 10%) | |  | |
| Question 19. | Did the evaluation design and style consider incorporation of the United Nations’ and UNICEF's commitment to a human rights-based approach to programming, to gender equality, and to equity? | | Yes, as part of ethical considerations (Section 2.3) |
| 19.1 | Reference and use of rights-based framework, and/or CRC, and/or CCC, and/or CEDAW, and/or other rights related benchmarks in the design of the evaluation. | | Yes |
| 19.2 | Clear description of the level of participation of key rights holders and duty bearers in the conduct of the evaluation, including in the development of recommendations (for example, a reference group is established, stakeholders are involved as informants or in data gathering). | | Yes |
| 19.3 | Stylistic evidence of the inclusion of these considerations can include: using human rights language; gender-sensitive and child-sensitive writing; disaggregating data by gender, age, and disability groups; disaggregating data by socially excluded groups. | | Yes – throughout report |
| Question 20. | Does the evaluation assess the extent to which the implementation of the intervention addressed equity? | | Yes – in Section 5.3 |
| 20.1 | Evaluation assesses the extent to which the implementation of the intervention addresses child rights and Leave No-one Behind (gender and other excluded and marginalised groups). It is disability inclusive, i.e. it is aligned with the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy as appropriate. | | Yes |
| Question 21. | Does the evaluation meet United Nations SWAP evaluation performance indicators? | | Yes – gender-responsive methodology, methods and tools, and data analysis techniques are selected. The evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations reflect a gender analysis |
|  | Note: this question will be rated according to United Nations SWAP standards | |  |
| 21.1 | GEEW is integrated in the evaluation scope of analysis, and evaluation criteria and questions are designed in a way that ensures GEEW-related data will be collected. | | Yes – See section 2.4 |
| 21.2 | Gender-responsive evaluation methodology, methods and tools, and data analysis techniques are selected. | | Yes – see methodology section. Data are disaggregated by gender where appropriate |
| 21.3 | The evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations reflect a gender analysis. | | Yes |
| SECTION I: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (weight 5%) | |  | |
| Question 22. | Can the executive summary inform decision-making? | | Yes |
| 22.1 | An executive summary is included that is of relevant conciseness and depth for key users (maximum of five pages unless otherwise specified in terms of reference). | | Yes |
| 22.2 | Includes all necessary elements (overview of the object of the evaluation, evaluation purpose, objectives and intended audience, evaluation methodology, key conclusions on findings, lessons learned if requested, and key recommendations) as per terms of reference. | | Yes |
| 22.3 | Includes all significant information to understand the object of the evaluation and the evaluation itself AND does not introduce new material beyond what is presented in the rest of the report. | | Yes |

1. Original RTA ToR

1. The previous RTA Phase 1 report uses the term ‘Phase’ which is now changed to ‘Round’ to be consistent with the wording of the Evaluation Office’s RTA Concept Note. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The ToR does not require any cost analysis and analysis of unexpected effects (positive and negative), and therefore these are not part of the RTA. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The strategy safeguards the most vulnerable and marginalised who are at risk of drop-out with a holistic approach and includes alternate learning pathways for girls, teacher training, support to prevent discrimination and violence in school settings and gender biases in the curriculum and pedagogy, and support for school-based water, sanitation and hygiene, including menstrual health and hygiene provisions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. It is important to recognise that the ToC we present is an *analysis tool*, whose objective is to organise our thinking about the COVID-19 response as a process. Because our ToC is meant to support our analysis, it may not correspond to the ToC(s) UNICEF may have developed. In fact, the RTA terms of reference has elements of the COVID response ToC, but it is focused on defining the five thematic pillars of COVID-19 response, rather than the process of the response. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. In 2018 BiH spent 4.4% of its GDP on education. However, when looking at per-student funding, BiH’s spending is much lower than the EU and OECD averages, especially at the primary level. In 2018, BiH spent 0.1% of its GDP in pre-primary education, 0.6% in primary and 2.4% in secondary, compared to the OECD averages of 0.5%, 1.4% and 1.9%, respectively (OECD Reviews of Assessment and Evaluation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in press)). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. If the teacher uses “adaptive instruction” it means that they adapt the lesson their their classes’ needs and knowledge, and/or changes the structure of the lesson on a topic that most students find difficult to understand (OECD/UNICEF, 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Qualitative data indicates that schools were closed at different times and to different extents throughout the pandemic. For example, in Serbia schools reopened in September 2020 with all children in primary schools attending face-to-face classes, while lower and upper secondary school students adopted a hybrid model mixing online and face-to-face learning. Due to the deteriorating epidemiological situation, however, authorities decided that students from fifth grade onwards had to go back to full distance learning as of 1 December 2020. Given that schools did not reopen linearly, it is therefore difficult to estimate exactly how long schools were closed for. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. [EURO\_COVID19\_Dashboard - PUBLIC (arcgis.com)](https://who.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/ead3c6475654481ca51c248d52ab9c61). The darker the colours, the more sever measures are. 0 - No measures:   
   1 - Recommend/Require adapting in-person teaching (physical distancing, hand hygiene, staggered arrival, separate entrances, etc.)  
   2 - Recommend/Require suspension of in-person teaching (transition to online or distance learning)  
   3 - Require suspension of in-person teaching on some levels or categories (e.g. just secondary schools)  
   4 - Require suspension of in-person teaching on all levels  [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. When interpreting the data presented, please note that differences between information products published by WHO, public health authorities, and other sources may occur. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data through a rigorous systematic approach to data-collection, categorization, coding and analysis, and continuous validation exercises, the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak is a fast-paced, dynamic situation in which data are collected from a wide range of governmental and nongovernmental sources, thus the possibility of discrepancies still exists. All data are subject to continuous verification and change. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Re-engagement goes beyond a mere return to attending school in a face-to-face format. A World Bank report defines it as follows: ‘Educational engagement (or academic engagement) refers to a relational, person-context construct which develops as a function of daily interactions between a developing young person and his or her experiences in various academic and social activities and with different individuals. A student’s level of this engagement, demonstrated by the interest, psychological investment, and active effort he or she directs toward learning and educational attainment, proves a multidimensional construct, including three components: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. School engagement, as demonstrated by attendance and completion of assignments, does not necessarily indicate educational engagement—that a student has engaged at all three levels (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive)—for learning and educational attainment. Educational engagement proves strongly and positively associated with higher academic achievement and higher likelihood of healthy social and emotional outcomes for young people’ (Rajasekaran and Reyes, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. [EURO\_COVID19\_Dashboard - PUBLIC (arcgis.com)](https://who.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/ead3c6475654481ca51c248d52ab9c61) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. The ECAR total is comprised of available data from each country, and therefore does not include all the countries under consideration in this report. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. The ECAR total is comprised of available data from each country, and therefore does not include all the countries under consideration in this report. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Country population figures are for the year 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Other COs felt more experienced to deal with this emergency, given that they had previous experience with the Syrian refugee crisis, for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Serbia’s regional yearly targets for its World Bank project were reached earlier than planned because all activities went online. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)