

MAKING SOCIAL PROTECTION WORK FOR CHILDREN IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

Existing challenges and opportunities in the region

Social protection is the set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing, reducing and eliminating economic and social vulnerabilities to poverty and deprivation – helping the poorest children and families meet their basic needs, overcome discrimination and exclusion, and cope with and overcome shocks. Key components are: cash transfers, programmes to ensure access to services (e.g., health insurance, subsidies for childcare), social support and care services (e.g., counselling, social work), and legislation (e.g., parental leave).

Global evidence has demonstrated that investment in child-sensitive, integrated social protection systems can help realize children's rights, increase human capital and enhance countries' economic and social progress. Child-sensitive social protection helps reduce gaps in the realization of rights between different groups of children and decreases the vulnerability of the most marginalized children and their families. It is in States' interests to invest in child-sensitive social protection. From rights-based, economic, political and social perspectives, the proven benefits of investment far outweigh the costs.

Research commissioned by UNICEF in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia has identified the following challenges and opportunities related to social protection for children in the region:

- As currently structured and administered, social protection in this region **is not ensuring an adequate living standard for children** or relieving their deprivations and vulnerabilities, and often **fails to reach the most marginalized** children and **those most in need of assistance**.
- **Cash benefits directed towards children and families living in poverty are usually too low in monetary value** to have a sustained impact on child and family poverty levels, and **large numbers of the poorest people are excluded** from social assistance benefits.
- **Social care and support services are underdeveloped** and **require significant investment** in order to reach the most marginalized children and families. **Programmes to help children and families access health, education, preschool and early childhood care services are not reaching all populations.**
- **Levels of spending on child- and family oriented social assistance benefits are very low** across most of the region. Underinvestment often results from **lack of political will rather than insufficient fiscal space**. Countries that spend the most tend to achieve the greatest reductions in child poverty.
- **Lack of awareness of programmes and discrimination** against the most vulnerable children and families and against recipients of social protection prevent many from receiving, or even applying for, benefits and services they are entitled to.
- **Programmes often fail to link social protection benefits with other social support and care services.** The resulting fragmented initiatives do not address multiple drivers of poverty and social exclusion, and generate duplications in coverage, money and time waste.
- **Widespread lack of data and analysis of the impact of social protection** programmes on children in the region makes it difficult to monitor implementation and assess performance. **Disaggregated data are scarce**, especially by ethnic identity or disability.
- **A number of countries in the region have already taken positive steps to reform their social protection benefits and services.** These can be examined in more detail to determine impacts and can be documented and replicated by other countries in the region.

PRIORITY ACTIONS TO REFORM SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

To fight child poverty and social and economic vulnerability, countries in the region need to develop well-integrated social protection systems that address children's specific needs, paying special attention to the most vulnerable. The following priority policy actions can guide reforms:

- **Prioritize the expansion of coverage of social assistance benefits for families with children, and of child benefits**, with the ultimate goal of achieving basic income security for all children.
- **Review the value of social transfers to ensure their adequacy**, linking them to national poverty lines, average household consumption in the poorest quintile, or national minimum income.
- **Allocate more resources to social protection** programmes that directly benefit children and protect these programmes, using the **most country-appropriate fiscal strategies**.
- **Scale up social support and care service provision** by investing in the **numbers and capacities** of social service providers (particularly social workers and case managers).
- **Expand state-subsidized health insurance schemes targeting poor and vulnerable groups**, including children, and ensure they cover preventive and secondary care as well as medicines for pregnant women and children up to age 18.
- **Develop overarching standards and protocols to coordinate and integrate** the provision of cash benefits and social support and care services, and link these to the provision of other services for children, such as early childhood care and learning, education, health and nutrition.
- **Devise mechanisms to broaden access to information** by the general population, and by children, **about the social protection benefits and services available**.
- **Address discrimination towards families and children recipients of social protection** through legislative changes, comprehensive awareness campaigns, and training of service providers.
- **Ensure** that all social protection programmes establish **clear, regular and timely accountabilities and oversight mechanisms**.
- **Collect data, disaggregated** by age, gender, ethnicity, language and disability status, to **assess the impact** of social protection programmes **on children**, adopt **child-sensitive indicators for programme monitoring** and conduct **programmatic evaluations and impact studies over time**, documenting and sharing good practices within and beyond the region.

Countries and territories included in the analysis are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244), Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

This brief is based on the UNICEF report 'Social Monitor: Social protection for child rights and well-being in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia', December 2015.



UNICEF promotes the rights and well-being of every child, in everything we do. Together with our partners, we work in 190 countries and territories to translate that commitment into practical action, focusing special effort on reaching the most vulnerable and excluded children, to the benefit of all children, everywhere.

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