

The journey to inclusion:

UNICEF support for
children with disabilities
in Europe and Central
Asia 2024-2030

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Key facts



There are an estimated 10.8 million children with disabilities in the Europe and Central Asia region – around 6 per cent of the total child population.¹



Children with disabilities are up to 30 times more likely to be in residential care than other children, and account for 38 per cent of those growing up in such care.



260,000 children with disabilities are being educated in specialized schools, rather than mainstream education.



Girls, older children and adolescents with disabilities, and those with intellectual disabilities, are at particular risk of exclusion, violence and discrimination.

From the moment they are born, children with disabilities in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region have two potential journeys in life. One is a journey towards exclusion, characterized by barriers that combine to deny them their rights from their earliest years of life. This pathway leads to greater dependency on the care and support of the State, with costs for society that are both financial and social, adding to isolation and inequality. The other leads towards inclusion, with the right support at the right time sweeping away these barriers so that children can reach their full potential. This pathway leads to greater independence, with tangible benefits for the economy and for society, including the strengthening of social cohesion and democratization.

There has been some progress for children with disabilities in the region in recent years, with governments' commitments to the inclusion of people with disabilities translating into strategies, policies and reforms. Yet there are gaps in implementation, and many children with disabilities still face discrimination and gaps in support that disrupt their journey towards inclusion.

While deinstitutionalized policies have reduced the overall number of children living in residential institutions, for example, children with disabilities have been left behind. Compared to their peers, they are far more likely to grow up in institutions² where they are deprived of nurturing care and are vulnerable to neglect and violence. Similarly, inclusive education is expanding and more children with disabilities are now attending regular schools. Yet they remain more likely to be out of school, or to be sent to specialized schools, including boarding schools, that do not provide the education – or social inclusion – they need. In addition, children with disabilities are still more likely to experience multi-dimensional poverty, as well as violence and abuse at home.³

The support available to them often follows a medical approach to disability, which shapes how children with disabilities are perceived and how services are provided. This is one of the root causes of the stigma that they face, with attention and resources focused on efforts to 'fix' children, rather than on adapting their environment to ensure their inclusion in their communities.

UNICEF's support for sustainable solutions

UNICEF is working to change this situation by supporting a journey to inclusion for every child with disabilities throughout their life course.

¹ UNICEF, [Children with Disabilities in Europe and Central Asia. A statistical overview of their well-being](#). UNICEF Data and Analytics Section: New York, 2023.

² UNICEF, TransMonEE analytical series: [Pathways to Better Protection - Taking stock of the situation of children in alternative care in Europe and Central Asia](#), UNICEF, Geneva, 2024.

³ [Children with Disabilities in Europe and Central Asia. A statistical overview of their well-being](#).

We work with governments to reinforce and implement policies that guarantee the rights of all children with disabilities. We support outreach services for families with young children that can identify and respond to developmental delays and disabilities at an early age, helping families stay together and giving children a chance to reach their potential. We aim to address the barriers that exclude them from schools and communities, working to make schools more inclusive and to change attitudes towards disability.

Every child with disabilities is unique, so we focus on holistic approaches that meet their specific needs, recognizing that 'one size-does-not-fit-all'. We aim to ensure that they have the support they need during childhood so that they can live independently as adults – and as part of their communities. This means building enabling environments around them where they have the resources and opportunities they need for full inclusion. We prioritize the potential of each child, aiming to ensure that they are protected, learning, thriving, included and connected.

UNICEF has more than three decades of experience in Europe and Central Asia on this area. We have supported deinstitutionalization and inclusive education reforms since the 1990s and our work has evolved over time to become a region-wide approach based on children's rights. Since 2018, our work has been guided by the Regional Strategy on Disability Inclusion 2018-2021, which emphasized support for children with disabilities throughout their childhood through cross-sectoral collaboration. Today, UNICEF's global [Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy](#) (DIPAS, 2024-2030) provides the conceptual and accountability framework for our work in the region. We have developed an Action Plan for UNICEF's Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) to address the specific barriers that children with disabilities face across countries in the region.

Our work with and for children with disabilities is also guided by international and regional policy frameworks that uphold the rights of all children – with no child left behind.

International and regional policy frameworks

Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

- Article 2: All rights apply to all children in every country without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's disability or other status.

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)

- Article 7:
 - States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children.
 - In all actions concerning children with disabilities, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.
 - States Parties shall ensure that children with disabilities have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them and are assisted to realize that right.

Sustainable Development Goals (2015)

- SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries
 - Target 10.2: The social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, disability or other status.

The European Child Guarantee (2021)

Working through National Action Plans in each EU Member State, the Guarantee aims to increase access to core social services for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, including a special focus on children with disabilities.

The European Union's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 (2021)

This aims to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in the EU and beyond, with an emphasis on addressing the needs of children and young people with disabilities.

About this report

This summary draws on the work of the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) with and for children with disabilities to develop pathways for their full inclusion in their communities. Section 2 outlines key barriers faced by children with disabilities in the region. Section 3 describes five priority areas for UNICEF across the region, together with milestones for the mobilization of DIPAS 2024-2030 to support a journey towards inclusion. Section 4 sets out key principles and cross-cutting issues. A final section outlines our commitments to ensure that UNICEF itself is fully inclusive and summarizes the investment case for our work in this area.

2

The journey to exclusion: Barriers for children with disabilities

The critical challenges that prevent the inclusion of children with disabilities in the ECA region include high levels of stigma and discrimination and sectoral reforms that do not prioritize disability inclusion. There are major gaps in the availability, affordability and quality of community-based services for children with disabilities, including

gaps in the provision of assistive technology (AT). There is also a lack of a common vision and collaboration across sectors, and of data to monitor implementation. As a result, children with disabilities face a number of key barriers to their health, development and well-being throughout their childhood and adolescence.



Barrier 1: Discrimination

Stigma around disability drives the exclusion of many children with disabilities across Europe and Central Asia from their earliest years and can shape their journey through childhood. In Serbia, for example, 45 per cent of parents of children with disabilities have said that they or their children have experienced insults, degrading treatment or harassment.⁴ Stigma and prejudice may deter families from seeking help or information, which leaves them struggling to cope and increases the risk that their child may be institutionalized.



Barrier 2: Risks to health and well-being from early childhood

The youngest children in the region face risks to their health from their earliest years, including low rates of breastfeeding and nutritional deficiencies that may lead to developmental delays.⁵ Health issues among young children may not be identified by service providers or parents early enough to prevent long-term disabilities⁶ because early childhood intervention services and specialist services are not always available. Health centres may be physically inaccessible and health information is not always provided in accessible formats.⁷ In addition, children with disabilities worldwide are 24 per cent less likely than their peers to receive early stimulation and responsive care in the family⁸ and available evidence suggests that this holds true for the Europe and Central Asia region.⁹

⁴ UNICEF Serbia, '[Children with disabilities facing difficulties and obstacles in realising their rights](#)', press release, Belgrade, 30 November 2017.

⁵ UNICEF, *Supporting Children with Developmental Difficulties in Early Childhood*, UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, Geneva, 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ UNICEF, *Situation of Children with Disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, UNICEF Country Office for Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2017.

⁸ UNICEF, *Seen, Counted, Included. Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities*, UNICEF, New York, 2021.

⁹ *Children with Disabilities in Europe and Central Asia: A statistical overview of their well-being*.



Barrier 3: Family separation and institutionalization

The region still has the highest rate of child institutionalization worldwide – 232 out of every 100,000 children live in residential care facilities – double the global rate.¹⁰ Governments across the region have been shifting the focus from residential institutional care to family-based options for decades, but these reforms have often left children with disabilities behind. In the absence of specialized family-based options, children with disabilities are up to 30 times more likely than their peers to be in residential institutions where they are often deprived of nurturing care and quality education and at risk of harm and neglect.¹¹



Barrier 4: Violence, exploitation and abuse

Children with disabilities face higher risks of violence and abuse, often linked to their isolation, either in residential institutions where they are often unseen, or in their own homes. At home, children with disabilities face high risks of corporal punishment, abuse and domestic violence. More than 80 per cent of children with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan and North Macedonia, for example, have experienced psychological aggression from their caregivers. In Georgia, North Macedonia and Uzbekistan, they are more likely to experience severe physical punishment.¹² There is also a lack of referral and support services for survivors.



Barrier 5: Lack of access to an inclusive quality education

Only 800,000 children with disabilities are in education in countries in the region. Across the region, children with disabilities are more likely to miss out on education than their peers.¹³ The gaps start early: in 2022, only around 43,000 children with disabilities across 16 countries took part in early childhood education. The gaps widen in adolescence: in Georgia, almost 1 in every 5 children with disabilities is not in upper secondary school, compared to 1 in every 10 without disabilities. Around 7 per cent of children with disabilities in Montenegro and Turkmenistan have never been to school at all.¹⁴ With mainstream schools often unable to cater for children with disabilities, around 260,000 children with disabilities continue to learn in segregated environments where they are separated from their peers and communities.¹⁵



Barrier 6: Lack of access to assistive technology

From hearing aids to augmentive communication (technology that helps children communicate), assistive technology (AT) helps children with disabilities function in the world. Yet children in the Europe and Central Asia have only limited access to AT. National systems lack the capacity to ensure its effective provision and there is a lack of awareness of its importance. While every country in the region guarantees access to some type of AT, basic provision often covers only devices that aim to help mobility, such as prosthetics, wheelchairs or crutches, and these are rarely appropriate or adapted for young children. The provision of devices that support vision, communication and cognition is minimal, with augmentative communication devices particularly underused.



Barrier 7: Poverty and a lack of social protection

Children with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than other children. Parents often give up work to care for them, and families may face heavy costs for their healthcare, transport and other essentials. Families may face long waits for a disability assessment, particularly in rural

¹⁰ UNICEF, TransMonEE analytical series: [Pathways to Better Protection - Taking stock of the situation of children in alternative care in Europe and Central Asia](#), UNICEF, Geneva, 2024.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² [Children with Disabilities in Europe and Central Asia: A statistical overview of their well-being](#).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ TransMonEE data: [Indicator: Number of children with disabilities in a special school](#).

areas, which is a pre-condition to get support. Every country in the region provides disability benefits for children, and some offer benefits to those who care for them. But these are not always adequate or accessible, and do not reach all of those who need them. More than half of all people with severe disabilities in Türkiye and Uzbekistan, for example, do not receive a disability cash benefit. Global evidence also shows that the link between disability and poverty can have a disproportionate impact on girls and women, particularly those from ethnic minorities.¹⁶



Barrier 8: Lack of access to justice

Children with disabilities find it harder than their peers to access justice.¹⁷ While all children face barriers in accessing justice, these are more severe for children with disabilities. They are mainly barriers to access, which can be the physical barriers that make it difficult to visit courts and police stations, but also communication barriers that hinder the ability of children with sensory and intellectual impairments to understand legal proceedings or express themselves adequately. Children with disabilities who live in institutions may struggle to attend hearings or meetings because they have no permission or transport.¹⁸



Barrier 9: Lack of protection during humanitarian emergencies

Children with disabilities are vulnerable during emergencies. Yet they are often overlooked in humanitarian action – as they are throughout childhood – as a result of stigma and lack of services. Those affected by the war in Ukraine, for example, struggle to access essential services, medication, transport, bomb shelters or to relocate to safer areas.¹⁹ Evacuation plans may not accommodate their needs, and they are at risk of being left behind.²⁰ Refugee and internally displaced children with disabilities face multiple barriers to accessing services. Many host countries, for example, demand official translations of disability certifications, which can be costly and time-consuming. A lack of assessment tools to overcome language barriers means delays in access to the specialized services children need.²¹

3

The journey towards inclusion: Promoting the rights of every child with disabilities

UNICEF upholds the rights of every child with disabilities across Europe and Central Asia (ECA).

Our vision is to achieve a more inclusive region by 2030 – a region where children with disabilities live in communities that embrace and support them, where their rights are realized and defended, and where they can reach their full potential and contribute to their societies.

We commit to transform the lives of 10.8 million children with disabilities in the region

by mainstreaming disability inclusion across every aspect of our advocacy, programming and operations. Our aim: a journey that increases their chances of enjoying full inclusion in their families, schools and communities.

Across the ECA region, UNICEF aims to ensure that every child – without exception – is **protected, learning, thriving, included and connected**.

This includes every child with disabilities to ensure that they are fully included in every relevant policy,

¹⁶ UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children: Children with Disabilities*. UNICEF, New York, 2013.

¹⁷ UNICEF, *Breaking down barriers: Equitable access to justice for children with disabilities*, UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, Geneva, 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ UN Women and Care International, *Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine*, Kyiv and Geneva, 2022.

²⁰ UNICEF, *Ukraine war response: Children with disabilities*, UNICEF, New York, 10 June 2022.

²¹ See e.g. Plan International (2024) *'Building bridges: Strengthening Inclusion for Refugee Children Living with Disabilities in Poland - Research brief'*, Woking, UK, 2024.

programme and approach. This is aligned with UNICEF's global Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy (DIPAS) 2022-2030 and the ECARO DIPAS Action Plan. Linked to these priorities, we have also identified key milestones that must be reached as children grow and develop, from their earliest years

to their young adulthood that also address the specific barriers faced by children with disabilities. Across every priority – and every key milestone – we aim to tackle the stigma and discrimination that prevent children with disabilities reaching their full potential.

DIPAS PRIORITIES IN ECA FLAGSHIP RESULTS

Regional priorities

Milestones



PROTECTING:

All children live in a secure family environment in the community

1

Deinstitutionalization and childcare reform prioritize the expansion of specialized family-based alternative care, family support services, and community-based services.



LEARNING: All children learn and socialize with their peers

2

Inclusive education reforms prioritize all levels of education with a focus on transition periods; special schools including special boarding schools are reformed; professionals collaborate to ensure that children with disabilities are empowered and learn, AT is provided.



THRIVING: All children receive the health care and nutrition they need

3

Systems for early detection and early childhood intervention are prioritized and gaps in the provision of inclusive health services, adequate nutrition and rehabilitation are addressed.



INCLUDING: All children enjoy an adequate standard of living and supports to live an independent life

4

Social protection reforms are expanded to provide adequate social assistance and integrated services and supports for families with children with disabilities, including AT.



CONNECTING: All children are engaged and heard on matters that concern them

5

Children with disabilities are consulted on policies and programmes; OPDs and parents have the capacities to engage in advocacy.



Priority 1:

PROTECTING – All children live in a secure family environment in the community

Milestones: Deinstitutionalization and childcare reform prioritize the expansion of specialized family-based alternative care, family support services, and community-based services.

Where we are: UNICEF has been a key partner for governments across the region for more than 30 years on efforts to **end the institutionalization of children with disabilities and keep families together** where possible. We prioritize the strengthening of family- and community-based care. We work, for example, to strengthen the capacities of social workers to support families of children with disabilities, including those with severe and complex disabilities. We support the closure of residential institutions for children with disabilities, and advocate for the resources once spent on these institutions to be channeled towards community-based services and inclusive education. The impact can be seen in Moldova, where institutions housing children with disabilities have been closed down.

Moldova closes its residential specialized schools

UNICEF has supported reforms by the Government of Moldova to close every residential specialized school and to channel resources to family-based care and inclusive education in mainstream schools for children with disabilities. As a result of these reforms, the number of children with disabilities in formal residential care fell by 95 per cent between 2009 and 2021, and every mainstream school in Moldova is now inclusive. Some of the old specialized schools have been repurposed to provide services for children with disabilities in their communities. **This achievement was made possible by wide-ranging reforms, based on cross-sectoral collaboration and changes in training.**

Where we are going: The goal is to have zero children in institutional care in the region by 2030. UNICEF will accelerate de-institutionalization efforts to transfer more than 101,000 children with disabilities from the region's residential institutions²² to family- and community-based care. At the same time, we will continue to support the creation, strengthening and integration of services that prevent the separation of children with disabilities from their families and communities.²³ We will continue to support reforms that prioritize specialized family-based alternative care, quality and affordable family support services, and community-based services, especially for children with complex needs – all of which are critical to prevent family separation and facilitate children's inclusion in the community.

UNICEF will support the transformation of all residential care institutions and the re-direction of resources to community-based support systems; facilitate the pooling of expertise and resources; work to harmonize action across sectors; and advocate for sustainable financing. We will prioritize investments to prevent institutionalization by building the capacities of mainstream services (health, education, social protection, child protection), as well as targeted services to promote and support the inclusion of children with disabilities.



Priority 2:

LEARNING – All children learn and socialize with their peers

Milestones: Inclusive education reforms prioritize all levels of education with a focus on transition periods; specialized schools (including boarding schools) are reformed; professionals collaborate to ensure that children with disabilities are empowered and learn; and schools are platforms for delivery of key services, including assistive technology.

Where we are: Children with disabilities should learn and socialize alongside their peers in school in the communities where they live. UNICEF has supported **inclusive education reforms** in the region since the late 1990s, contributing to solid progress on national policies. The share of children with disabilities studying in specialized schools fell from 40 per cent in 2018 to 34 per cent in 2022, while the share of them in mainstream schools increased from 60 to 66 per cent.²⁴ Today, we promote major, long-term reforms, with a strong focus on the permanent embedding of inclusive education. We recognize that simply enrolling children with disabilities in mainstream schools is not enough: their full inclusion

²² The number refers to the latest data (2020-2022, depending on the country) children with disabilities aged 0-17 in formal residential care at the end of the year and includes available data on children in boarding homes and special boarding schools. However, the actual overall number is likely to be significantly higher as, for many countries, data on children with disabilities in boarding schools is not available. Data source: TransMonEE.

²³ UNICEF, *Keeping families together in Europe*, UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, Geneva, 2024.

²⁴ Region-wide figures are based on TransMonEE Data Collection: 2023 Publication, for 20 of the 22 countries in UNICEF's Europe and Central Asia region, and do not include data from Greece and Turkmenistan. For Montenegro and Ukraine, 2022 values were estimated based on 2020 values.

in education requires specialized services and tailored support for their learning. For this to happen, teachers, school professionals, specialists and social workers need to work towards the same goal: to ensure that children with disabilities gain the skills and confidence they need for their transition to an independent life.

Support for the transformation of Serbia's education system

UNICEF has supported Serbia's shift towards inclusive education for children with disabilities since 2009. Through the EU-funded project 'Learning Together', UNICEF has helped to:

- enhance the skills of teachers to support children's personalized and inclusive learning
- transform special education, based on a human-rights model
- strengthen the capacities of local self-government units to monitor inclusive education and develop local, evidence-based inclusive education policies
- provide intensive and targeted support to children with disabilities through schools-based measures, assistive technology and community-based services
- strengthen the capacities of intersectoral committees on the assessment of the educational, social protection and health needs of children and students
- enhance pre-service teacher training with values, knowledge, skills and attitudes to support inclusive education and a shift in mindsets among teachers.

Where we are going: UNICEF will continue to **prioritize inclusive education** to benefit all children with disabilities in the region, including at least 3 million who are out of school and the more than 260,000 who are thought to be in specialized schools or boarding schools.²⁵ This is an investment in helping each child reach their full potential and acquire knowledge and skills that prepare them for work and life. It is a cost-effective contribution to countries' human capital development, reducing dependence on social assistance and economic development while enhancing social cohesion.



Priority 3:

THRIVING – All children receive the health care and nutrition they need

Milestones: Systems for early detection and early childhood intervention are prioritized and gaps in the provision of inclusive health services, adequate nutrition and rehabilitation are addressed.

Where we are: UNICEF works with its partners across the region to reach young children with developmental delays and children with disabilities with inclusive health services (immunization, mother and child health care) and early detection. We support the optimal development of every child through primary health care and home-visiting systems by strengthening the capacity of the health workforce and building national systems for child-centred and family based health and nutrition. Our work to develop national, inter-sectoral, family centred early childhood intervention (ECI) systems has aimed to expand services for young children and their families in 12 countries, and includes ECI situation analysis, the development of legislation and the piloting of new models, as well as the development of professional capacity. These efforts have helped to improve understanding of the importance of ECI.

²⁵ TransMonEE data, [Indicator: Number of children with disabilities in a special schools.](#)

Building capacities for early identification

UNICEF has been helping countries across the Europe and Central Asia region to build capacities for early identification of children at risk of or with developmental difficulties. Our Country Offices are working to strengthen home-visiting services which act as a bridge between the families of young children and a range of services. Home-visiting nurses – health workers who have regular contact with families – visit pregnant women and young children to offer guidance and support for child development and nurturing care, improve developmental monitoring and ensure the early identification of any developmental concerns. We support a universal and progressive model of home visiting that addresses the complex needs of families with children who have developmental difficulties through cooperation with other health providers, social welfare and education services. In addition, we support the strengthening of routine health care services for children to ensure universal developmental monitoring with the use of validated tools.

Where we are going: UNICEF will continue to work across the region to **develop the policies, capacities and systems that are needed to ensure child and maternal nutrition and health.**

We will continue to support and promote efforts to close enormous gaps in the provision of inclusive health and nutrition services, to expand accessibility and the provision of assistive technology linked to rehabilitation, and to ensure that every child is covered by health insurance.



Priority 4:

INCLUDING – All children enjoy and adequate standard of living and support to live an independent life

Milestones: Social protection reforms are expanded to provide adequate social assistance and integrated services and support for families with children with disabilities, including AT.

Where we are: Strong social protection for children with disabilities is essential to empower families to care for children with disabilities and keep families together. It includes social assistance, cash benefits for families to cover the extra costs of disability, and financial support to access services, and is crucial for children with disabilities who need more intense and permanent support. Notable strategies employed by UNICEF include the creation of explicit linkages across programmes through integrated social registries and the establishment or strengthening of multi-sectoral case management and referral mechanisms.²⁶

Strengthening social protection systems in Armenia, Georgia and Romania

In Armenia, UNICEF has supported the Government's efforts to create a more integrated, proactive and holistic social protection system since 2010. A 'one window' approach was developed to support families and children – including children with disabilities – based on their individual needs, which brings together multiple benefits and service providers in 18 Integrated Social Centres across the country. These provide tailor-made support to children and their families to reduce their vulnerability to poverty and deprivation, including cash (such as disability allowance, pension, and maternity benefits) and non-cash benefits (e.g. social support, labour market programmes). Needs assessment and coordination of support provision is handled by professional case managers.²⁷

²⁶ Sammon, Elayn M., et al., [Integrated Social Protection Systems: A Review of Different Approaches in UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Region Phase II: Synthesis Report](#), Oxford Policy Management and UNICEF, Oxford UK, 2020.

²⁷ UNICEF, ['Inclusive Social Protection Systems for Children with Disabilities Social Protection: Regional Issue Brief'](#), UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, Geneva, 2019.

In Georgia, UNICEF has supported comprehensive reforms that link disability assessment with the provision of adequate social allowances and social services. A UNICEF-commissioned study on estimating the cost of goods and services is being used to refine the package of support and services for children with disabilities.

Where we are going: UNICEF recognizes that families with children with disabilities are more affected by poverty and face additional costs related to disability. We will continue to **support inclusive social protection reforms** to provide adequate social assistance and integrated services that cover the additional costs that face children with disabilities and their families. The aim is to ensure an adequate standard of living and enable inclusion of children with disabilities through access to services across the life course.



Priority 5:

CONNECTING – All children are engaged and heard on matters that concern them, and they are empowered and equipped to make the transition to work

Milestones: Children with disabilities are consulted on policies and programmes, and programmes for skills development are accessible and inclusive of young people with disabilities.

Where we are: UNICEF supports the **participation of adolescents with disabilities** in policy development and in our own programming across the region. We work to include children and adolescents with disabilities in our research and evaluations – a crucial investment in generating evidence on their situation and on their perspectives – and in our programming. In Belarus, Bulgaria, Kosovo²⁸, Serbia, and Tajikistan, for example, young people with disabilities are members of UNICEF's Youth Advisory Boards – sharing their views on our programmes and practices.

Skills to build connections for work and life

In Greece, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan UNICEF empowers adolescents with disabilities by equipping them with information, communication and technology (ICT) skills and other skills that will enhance their employability. In Kazakhstan, for example, UNICEF is implementing the 'Developing digital skills for visually impaired adolescents' initiative, which focuses on digital, employment, and social and business entrepreneurship skills. In Ukraine, UNICEF has partnered with an ICT company, EPAM, to train young people with disabilities on various aspects of the ICT profession.

Where we are going: UNICEF will leverage its experience to **expand the involvement of children with disabilities in policy processes** and strengthen the capacities of parents and OPDs for advocacy in the region. We will empower adolescents and young people with disabilities to take an active role in the decisions and programmes that affect their lives and connect them to programmes that build their skills and support their journey towards the labour market and an independent life. We will lead by example: intensifying the involvement and empowerment of children and adolescents with disabilities across our own programmes. This includes creating more accessible and inclusive spaces where they can express their views and concerns.

²⁸ References to Kosovo are understood to be in the context of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

4

'Must-haves' for the journey to inclusion



Translating principles into action



Tackling stigma and discrimination

UNICEF commits to **promote the inclusion of children** with disabilities in all aspects of life. We will build on the momentum already achieved through nationwide campaigns across the region to tackle the negative attitudes and norms that underlie stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities. We aim to reach societies, communities, parents and professionals across the region with social behaviour change approaches that challenge negative attitudes and promote diversity. This requires investment in measures to address harmful attitudes among frontline workers and stakeholders and to shift away from the medical approach to disability towards an approach based on human rights.



Prioritizing access to inclusive mainstream services

UNICEF will continue to work to **ensure that mainstream services are accessible** and inclusive for all children with disabilities across all sectors. We will prioritize support to: inclusive education reforms at every level of education; the strengthening of health systems and childcare systems; and the development of social protection policies.



Strengthening cross-sectoral approaches

UNICEF will continue to **foster interdisciplinary collaboration** among professionals from different sectors. This includes setting up integrated service delivery for children with disabilities and their families, improving case management and shared information systems, and aligning sectoral policies around joint visions for the inclusion of children with disabilities.



Promoting and supporting innovation

UNICEF will **explore opportunities to use technology and digital solutions** for disability assessment and needs assessment; the harmonization and exchange of data across sectors; the introduction of innovative approaches to financing services; and the empowerment of children and young people with disabilities to seek and demand change on accessible infrastructure and transport. We will continue to test products, solutions and services, and will scale up efforts to ensure that technologies are accessible for users with disabilities.



Ensuring disability-inclusive action in humanitarian, emergency and fragile contexts

UNICEF will continue to take action for children with disabilities **before, during and after emergencies**. We will strengthen our planning and delivery of disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction, emergency preparedness, and response plans, as well as strategies to build the resilience of services and systems across sectors, ensuring that children with disabilities are visible and well-represented. We will strengthen our capacity to gather data on children with disabilities during emergencies to inform our advocacy and programming. We will double down on advocacy with the EU and national governments to ensure that information, services and support for refugee and migrant children with disabilities are accessible and inclusive. And we will develop a comprehensive resource package for UNICEF on addressing the needs of young children with disabilities in humanitarian settings, as well as guidelines on assessment and determination of disability in displacement settings.



Mobilizing finance and resources

Investment is needed to develop and roll-out of new services and approaches to support the inclusion of children with disabilities – from deinstitutionalization to the provision of AT. UNICEF will provide costings and undertake public finance analysis to explore the shifting of resources, identify fiscal spaces, and ensure proper allocations for scale-up and sustainability for new services and systems. In addition, we will continue mobilizing resources from internal UNICEF and UN funding ventures (e.g. Greening and Accessibility Fund, the UNPRPD and SDG Funds), the private sector, and international institutions. The use of innovative financing will also be explored.



Strengthening partnerships

UNICEF will continue to use its convening power to **build or strengthen partnerships**. We will bring stakeholders together to create a common understanding and commitment on services that are inclusive for children with disabilities while recognizing the importance of investing at local level where inclusion happens. We will, for example, advocate with government ministries to embed accessibility in national legislation while promoting accessible playgrounds, roads and other infrastructure, as well as greater communication among local governments. We will prioritize partnerships with OPDs to uphold the right of people with disabilities to be heard and to leverage their experiences, perspective and expertise for effective policy and programming. We will expand our partnership base to work with all branches and levels of government, as well as international institutions and donors, civil society, media and academia. And we will invest in partnerships with the private sector to maximize our work on accessibility, addressing social norms, and promoting innovative products and services.



Enhancing data, monitoring and evaluation

UNICEF is well-placed to initiate comprehensive support for the improvement of administrative data on children with disabilities in the region, following the positive example of improving data on alternative care for children with disabilities that encompasses developing indicators and

guidance, and data collection and analysis.²⁹ We will also continue to lead on situation analyses of children with disabilities and support the generation of disability-disaggregated data to inform policies across sectors and in humanitarian action. As well as improving the disaggregation of data in our own documents and reporting, we will continue to support governments on data collection. Monitoring will be enhanced by guidance to Country Offices on implementing the Child Rights Monitoring framework. The monitoring powers of parliaments, national human rights institutions, OPDs and associations of parents of children with disabilities will also be leveraged. All evaluations will assess the accessibility and adequacy of UNICEF-supported interventions for children with disabilities. We will strengthen our internal capacities to implement the guidelines on [Disability-Inclusive Evaluations in UNICEF](#), building on the positive trend of incorporating disability inclusion in UNICEF evaluations, and will conduct more disability-specific evaluations.

5 Our own commitment: a fully inclusive UNICEF

UNICEF aims to ‘be the change we want to see’ by ensuring the full inclusion of people with disabilities within its own operations and practices, as well as every programme. To this end, UNICEF in Europe and Central Asia will recruit and support qualified personnel with disabilities, train all personnel on disability inclusion, and work to ensure that our procurement, communications and other processes are inclusive and accessible. We will also systematically mainstream disability inclusion, specifically of children with disabilities, into all of our media communications and advocacy.

Our leadership

UNICEF will champion the rights of children with disabilities, communicate the key challenges and regional UNICEF goals in internal and external fora, and organize and participate in regional, EU-level, and country events related to the inclusion of children with disabilities, such as those related to the European Child Guarantee and the Regional Disability Summit, and promote disability inclusion across UNICEF’s work streams.

Our planning

We will enhance the integration of disability inclusion in our Regional Office Management Plan and all of our Country Programme Documents across every outcome and output area. Our strategic plans and documents will make explicit references to UNICEF’s global and regionally contextualized disability inclusion goals and to international commitments and evidence, and will include disability-specific indicators and disaggregated data.

Our internal coordination

We will improve our structures and processes to enhance internal coordination on disability inclusion. There will be a staff member in each office with knowledge of disability inclusion to provide technical assistance, as part of the focal point network to coordinate actions on disability inclusion. In addition to improving cross-sectional support, this will enhance UNICEF’s leadership role in disability inclusion for children with disabilities, and contribute to UN working groups and programmes and disability inclusion coordination at regional and national levels.

²⁹ UNICEF and Eurochild, ‘[Children in alternative care: Comparable statistics to monitor progress on deinstitutionalisation across the European Union](#)’, UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, Geneva, 2021.

6

An investment case for the inclusion of children with disabilities

UNICEF's Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy (DIPAS) 2022-2030 and ECARO's implementation of the strategy in Europe and Central Asia provide a clear case for investment in the inclusion of all children and adolescents with disabilities in their societies. The social returns on such investment are clear, with the greater inclusion of all marginalized groups supporting the creation of societies that are more peaceful and sustainable, where all citizens feel respected and valued.

The full implementation of DIPAS 2024-2030, backed by the necessary investment, would also generate sizeable economic benefits for nations, given the high potential returns generated by disability inclusion.

- Every dollar invested in assistive technology generates a return of nine dollars.
- Longer-term returns on investment in the education of children with disabilities can be two to three times higher than investment in education for the general population.
- 7 per cent could be added to a nation's gross domestic product if people with disabilities were earning fair wages.³⁰

Why invest in UNICEF's work for children with disabilities?

Investments in UNICEF help to strengthen the systems that can deliver sustainable results for children with disabilities – paying dividends for each child, for their families, their communities and nations long into the future.

UNICEF has been at the forefront of the disability inclusion agenda in the Europe and Central Asia region for more than three decades. During that time, our advocacy and technical contributions have supported the development of national strategies and plans for disability inclusion, the embedding of disability inclusion reforms, and the generation of vital evidence on children with disabilities. We have advocated for increased accountability and state financing, and have engaged with children, adolescents, young people and organizations of persons with disabilities across the region.

As a result, a strong platform is already in place for our work to build a region that is fit for every child with disabilities. UNICEF's global [Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy](#) (DIPAS) 2024-2030 provides a conceptual framework that will enable us to accelerate and expand our efforts in the region, as well as a strategic direction for our own greater organizational inclusivity.

³⁰ UNICEF, *Disability inclusion at scale: An investment opportunity for the public and private sectors*, Geneva and New York, September 2023.



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