

FOCUS ON CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

The issue¹

In Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia² all countries have signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and almost all have signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The process of overwhelming interest in signature and ratification of the CRPD indicates that countries in the region recognise that disability is an evolving concept and that it results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Therefore, the CRPD provides a bio-psycho-social model of understanding disability, quite different from the traditional “medical” model which, in the region, has been historically reflected within the “defectology” theories and practices of institutionalisation. The CRPD defines persons with disabilities as those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

However, despite the overwhelming signature and ratification of the CRPD in the region, there are still many children in the region who are being left behind – children with disabilities – and their marginalisation is often masked by generally improving national and regional statistics. In all countries, children with

disabilities are the hardest to reach and often the most vulnerable. In the region, children with disabilities are often deemed “uneducable” and a burden on their families, communities and society in general. It is not uncommon for children with disabilities to be left out of official birth registers, or for parents to be urged to place their new-borns with a developmental delay or disability under the care of state institutions.

Whether they are in state care or living with their families, children with disabilities are vulnerable to physical, mental and emotional abuse and neglect, and often have no access to basic health care services, proper nutrition, day care, family respite care, community-based rehabilitation, psycho-social support, social protection, or the specialised health care they might need. Accessing benefits and services is often overly cumbersome, with complicated certification and application procedures that often need to be repeated regularly. And even where services are available, they may not be based at community level, which increases the risk of institutionalisation.

Children with disabilities and their families are often found among the poorest in society, and young children with disabilities are among those who do not have access to early intervention services or early learning opportunities. Early diagnosis is problematic, and often disability is diagnosed late with important opportunities for early intervention being missed as a result.

¹ Most information contained in this brief is based on the draft report “Rapid Review on Inclusion and Gender”, UNICEF Regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS), forthcoming.

² The region spans 21 countries and one territory: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Romania, the Russian Federation (no office in country), Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

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Throughout the region, there is a lack of community-based services that “team around the child” and can provide family-centered approaches to promote the development of young children with developmental difficulties or at risk of a disability.

Children with disabilities of school age often do not attend school because of physical and attitudinal barriers, or because most educational systems (school buildings, teachers and parents, curriculums and materials, etc.) are not flexible enough to allow for individualised instruction.

In the region, although the greatest majority of countries are signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the CRPD, parents and children with disabilities are often uninformed and unaware of their own rights and protection mechanisms under the law. Children with disabilities live a life of isolation, often staying in state institutions throughout their life, in many cases attending special boarding schools that provide only remedial skills, or staying within the sphere of their own families, without access to, or the possibility of fully participating, in their community lives.

How many children with disabilities are there?

Rigorous data related to children with disabilities does not exist in the region and elsewhere. Because countries define “disability” in different ways and there is no internationally-agreed data-collection methodology, we cannot be certain of how many children with disabilities there are in our region. Lack of early detection and public stigma also contribute to under-reporting. However, estimates suggest that:

- In the region there could be as many as 5.1 million children with disabilities, of which 3.6 million are not counted in social registers. These children are invisible.

- At least 2.5 million children of basic school age across the region are still out of school, and as many as one third of them are estimated to be children with disabilities.
- In some countries in the region children with disabilities represent up to 60 per cent of all abandoned children, especially those in institutional care.

What are the main opportunities and challenges?

Children with disabilities encounter different forms of exclusion and are affected by them to varying degrees.

However, in all countries of the region, children with disabilities have the shared experience of being defined and judged by their disability rather than their potential.

Today, children with disabilities in the region still face constant, pervasive and violent discrimination in the form of negative attitudes from the general population, from professionals, and often from their own families and are excluded from cultural and social life.

Aside from discrimination, children with disabilities face different challenges and different barriers depending on their life situation, the country where they live, the level of affluence of their families, and their individual characteristics.

“Children with disabilities” are first children, and the term is used to describe a heterogeneous group of children that is as varied and complex as any other.

Each individual child must be valued and respected for their own individual potential and contribution.

“Building inclusive societies require that we consider children with disabilities as assets, and disability as part of human diversity.”

What UNICEF does to support countries to realise the rights of ALL children

UNICEF is working towards reversing the vicious cycle of stigma and discrimination into favorable conditions. Access and participation in social and cultural life are, for children with disabilities in the region, largely bound by social norms, traditions and cultural beliefs that are based on reductionist views of disability. In the region, children with disabilities have been viewed as intrinsically “defective”, in need of life-long care, shelter, and pity and their participation in full and meaningful lives has been bound by the belief that “defects” are more meaningful than abilities.

However, the CRPD and its commitment to building inclusive societies require that we consider children with disabilities as assets, and disability as part of human diversity. In reality, the signature and ratification of the CRPD will translate into actions that reflect a socially responsible way of thinking about ALL children, including children with disabilities. A disability does not happen within the child. A disability happens when a child with an impairment is limited (or prevented) from taking part in society, on an equal basis with others, due to social and environmental barriers.

- **Be the voice of children, break the silence** and generate awareness about the existing gaps and barriers related to disability.
 - Identify State obligations related to children with disabilities and **provide technical advice to support legislation, policies, programmes, and monitoring systems** to reduce disparities and protect all children.
- **Support collection of data disaggregated by disability, for all boys and girls**, including data related to categories and level of severity, and support information sharing and monitoring capacity of national systems related to needs and opportunities for all children, including boys and girls with disabilities.
- **Monitor, analyse and document** the circumstances preventing girls and boys with disabilities from enjoying their human rights and achieving their full potential.
- Focus on a few country-relevant targeted priorities and establish clear and specific accountabilities, to achieve tangible results in line with the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2014-2017 as related to the rights of all boys and girls with disabilities.
- **Strengthen partnerships and harmonise efforts** with international actors, as well as national stakeholders, civil society and the private sector to advocate for disability-sensitive policies and promote equality at all levels and spheres of society, focusing particularly on boys and girls with disabilities and emphasising the promotion and strengthening of parent and caregivers groups and disabled person’s organisations.
- **Continue promoting a more inclusive common equity approach to programming** by combining drivers of inequities in child and women’s rights related to four major cross-cutting equity dimensions in the region: gender, disability, ethnic and linguistic minority and migration.
- **Ensure disability-mainstreaming through all UNICEF programming**, and across all sectors and throughout the regional priority result areas of UNICEF’s work known as the regional agenda.
- **Demonstrate, document and analyse relevant and evidence-based best practices** and lessons-learned for policy development and service implementation.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES IN THE REGION

- **Treat every child, first and foremost, as a child and a holder of rights**, regardless of their or their parents' perceived disability status.
- **Prioritise action** that involves changing the social norms, cultural practices and public attitudes that are largely responsible for the violation of most rights of children with disabilities. Start by actively promoting the signature, ratification, implementation and monitoring of the CRPD.
- **Promote approaches to disability-mainstreaming work** that emphasises children with disabilities' worth and promotes a public image that focuses on the value of their abilities, inherent dignity and worth, and work to fight discrimination and build awareness of disability.
- **Support the development of policies** that actively lead towards dismantling barriers to inclusion, and coordinate services across various ministries to ensure life-long, all-inclusive services that ensure equal and inalienable rights for all children, including children with disabilities.
- **Engage in, and provide opportunities for discussions** with governments and counterparts related to the ways in which national legislation, policy and practices are responsible for perpetuating a reductionist view of children with disabilities.
- Support the improvement of **data-collection tools and methodologies** to ensure that a rigorous and transparent accounting of ALL children is used in decision-making and to improve service provision; promote the alignment of each country's definition of "disability" with the CRPD.
- **Support families** of children with disabilities and promote their transition from institutional care to community-based living and support.
- **Highlight the benefit to all children - and for the long term social and democratic development of a country - of including children with disabilities on equal footing as all other children. Inclusion applies in all situations: in schools, in families, in services and in society as a whole.**



UNICEF promotes the rights and wellbeing 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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