

I. Background: economic situation and well-being of children in Belarus

With a total population of 9.5 million people, 1.9 million are children (51.1% boys and 48.9% girls). While Belarus experienced strong economic growth prior to 2011, recent years have seen a recession and growing debt burden with country's public budget facing strong pressures. As a result, the progress made in reducing poverty has been deteriorating since end 2014, creating significant equity gaps for children and families with children. For example, poverty among families with many children is growing faster than the national poverty: the share of households with 3 children and more have been growing since mid-2014, being at 18.6% in 2014 and reaching 28.2 % by the first half of 2017. Children make up 19.5% of Belarus' population, but they account for 37.3% of the country's poor (2016). In the first half of 2017, 210,000 children or 11.3 % lived below the national absolute poverty line (US\$95 per capita monthly as of July 2017). Out of all households, the share of low-income households with children decreased from 16.1% in 2005 to 7.1% in 2014 but increased to 8.4% by the beginning of 2017 (8.6 by July, 2017)¹. Risk of poverty is higher for children with two or more siblings, children with disabilities (CWD), and children in single-parent households. Furthermore, with focus of social assistance largely to families with children under 3 years, a tendency has appeared that elder children and adolescents are more severely affected by poverty ([Poverty Factsheet](#)). Poverty may often be associated with under-care and lack of parental control which, in turn, may trigger vulnerabilities related to adolescent health and behavior.

II. UNICEF's priorities in addressing development challenges

Health. Belarus' concerted efforts to maintain high levels of healthcare and immunization have resulted in important advances over the last years for young children's health, with significant improvements in infant (IMR) and under five mortality rates (U5MR) as well as maternal mortality. Moreover, the country reduced significantly equity gaps (both between sexes and geographical areas) in neonatal, IMR and U5MR. In 2016, infant mortality was 3.2 deaths per 1,000 live births (equally in urban and rural areas) compared to 7.1 in 2005 (6.0 and 10.0, respectively), while under-five mortality was 4.1 deaths per 1,000 live births (4.0 in urban and 4.5 in rural areas) as compared to 9.3 in 2005 (7.5 and 14.1, respectively). Actions were taken to increase the survival rate of pre-mature and low birth weight babies, being at 75% in 2015. Approximately 4500 children are born prematurely every year. The side effect of the decreasing IMR is growing child disability in Belarus (168,200 or 9.1% of all children as of beginning of 2017). In the short and longer-run that implies higher demand on health services, including preventive, curative and rehabilitation interventions, which development is being addressed now by UNICEF projects with the Government.

Jointly with UNAIDS, UNICEF supported the country in eliminating mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) that resulted in official validation of elimination of MTCT of both HIV and syphilis. Belarus has received the certificate of validation of the elimination of mother-to-child-transmission of both HIV and syphilis in 2016 (to-date, the first and only country in EECA to confirm both).

Despite these impressive statistics, health advances made in early years are not being effectively maintained in adolescent health. In 2016, 14,991 children and adolescents were registered as having substance dependencies. Unsafe sexual behaviour often leads to increased risks of acquiring sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and unwanted pregnancies. Adolescents are also experiencing greater levels of mental distress, with the consequences that the share of mortality from suicides among adolescents (10-17) growing to comprise 35% of all deaths from external causes in 2016 for this age group. To address adolescent vulnerabilities UNICEF prioritizes expanding the network of Youth-Friendly Health Centres and improve services for vulnerable adolescents; promoting HIV express-testing and reduce stigma against at-risk adolescents; developing a system of identification, registration and specialized assistance to child and adolescent victims of violence and crime; increasing resilience of teenagers towards use of psychoactive substances, and improving rehabilitation system for young drug users ([Adolescence Factsheet](#)).

Education. Under the MDG 2 "Universal primary education", the country achieved universal coverage for boys and girls. Overall, good education indicators do not cover the actual situation for vulnerable children such as those living in rural areas and children with disabilities. In 2016, 74.8% of all children 1-5 years attended pre-school education programmes, yet with a significant gap between urban and rural settings, 81.8% and 49.4% respectively. Although the Ministry of Education claims to have 70% of children with special educational needs in regular school, closer analysis shows that these are mainly children with mild developmental difficulties, such as mild speech disorders. 30 % of children with disabilities, especially intellectual, are in special education segregated from general education system ([Disability Factsheet](#)).

In October 2016, Belarus ratified the UNCRPD, which has created momentum to advance the disability agenda, with an accompanying action plan passed in May 2017 that has established a framework for responses. In 2017, UNICEF has supported a training programme of 850 teachers, special pedagogues and parents on inclusive education delivered by the National Resource Center on Inclusive Education. UNICEF is supporting the development of the training materials for inclusive education settings.

¹ Household Budget Survey, Belstat.

Social Protection. While some progress was achieved in reducing institutionalization of children, declining from 41.5% in 2005 of children in state care living in residential institutions to 12.5%, in 2015, improvements have not benefitted all child groups. Children with disabilities and special needs remain among the most vulnerable to institutionalization, representing 70% of children in infant homes and 54% of children in other residential care institutions (bringing the overall proportion of children with disabilities in residential care at 48.3% of all children in institutions). Over 22% of children live in single-parent families, with the key determinants being family breakdown or death of a parent. The prevalence of violence against children remains high with 51.1% of children aged 1-17 years reporting experiences of either physical punishment or psychological aggression by caregivers within a one month period. By the end of 2016, as many as 26,130 children (1.4% of child population) were recognized as “being in social danger” due to family “dysfunctionality”. Overall, 19% or 136,000 of adolescents (10-17 years) were considered vulnerable in 2016². Limited capacity of service providers to detect, report and address cases of abuse and neglect; lack of family-centred services and weak inter-sectoral collaboration; high prevalence of alcohol addiction and social acceptance of corporal punishment are the key bottlenecks for children’s protection, leaving many vulnerable families unassisted and resulting in social protection responses only when families are already in deep crisis.

Furthermore, the social protection system lacks strong family support and prevention, case-management like, responses to avoid the risk of children entering state care and subsequently institutions. The CO’s priority in the area of social protection is to enhance an integrated cross-sectoral approach where social support and benefits are closely connected with social services to create a synergy in response needed to reduce overlapping adolescent vulnerabilities and child poverty.

Justice. Overall, Belarus has seen some positive trends in justice for children. In the last ten years, juvenile offending declined sharply -- from 9,096 crimes in 2005 to 2,354 in 2016. While the range of measures not involving deprivation of liberty has increased (e.g. deferral of punishment, conditional sentences, and judgments without imposing a penalty), a strong punitive approach remains widespread in the justice system with undeveloped diversion and probation services that focus on prevention of juvenile offending, rehabilitation. Furthermore, many children are still being registered through police inspections dealing with minors (11,162 children in 2016) because they have offended or are considered “at risk of offending”. This practice uses loose criteria and leads towards these children’s stigmatization and exclusion³. The number of cases of administrative offences committed by juveniles (14-17 years) registered by the Ministry of Interior amounted to 22,361 during 2016.

In contrast to the decreasing trend of juvenile offenses, over 2012-2015 crimes against children increased by 36% (from 5,966 crimes in 2012 to 8,099 in 2015). This trend is particularly disturbing as children in contact with the law have limited or no access to child-friendly justice procedures. Belarus’ weak coordination between sectors provides children in need with fragmented and ineffective responses. The country’s adoption of the National Human Rights Action Plan (2016-2019) provides a framework from which to enhance justice responses for children. Promotion of a Human Rights Based Approach and Rule of Law, along with strengthening of child protection system, are major priorities for UNICEF programming in Belarus ([Justice Factsheet](#)).

Participation and empowerment. As in other countries, Belarusian adolescents and young people want to participate in decisions affecting their lives. While the Government invites adolescent and youth participation in public life, this encouragement is limited to a few selected areas (e.g. sports, culture and social welfare) and often is monitored under tight supervision of government agencies or government affiliated NGOs. There are some limited “open spaces” developing for adolescents and youth where more freedom for self-development is becoming possible, but these environments are largely limited to large cities such as Minsk and regional centers and leave out adolescents and youth from rural areas. UNICEF’s priority is to strengthen adolescents’ meaningful participation in decision-making, emphasizing the engagement of the most vulnerable groups and empowering NEETs – those not in employment, education and training ([Adolescence Factsheet](#)).

III. Main partners for UNICEF’s engagement in SDGs

UNICEF holds the same priority principles as the SDG goals, with a focus on equity where the core commitment is to leave no one behind. The SDGs can only deliver on the promise of equity if the Government and development partners know which children and families are thriving and which are being left behind ([SDGs Factsheet](#)) – that is why UNICEF seeks to strengthen the country’s capacity to monitor child rights, invests in data and knowledge generation, paying due attention to the interests, concerns and participation of key Government ministries and CSOs.

UNICEF in Belarus’ programme focuses on the most vulnerable child groups – with particular attention to cross-cutting issues of disability, violence and adolescence. These themes coincide with key strategies present in the SDGs, with work to close gaps of inequity among child groups and establish protective and inclusive environments to be done together with the main partners of UNICEF: the National Commission on the Child Rights, Belstat, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Economy and civil society organizations. The joint work of UNICEF with the main partners is coordinated within the National Action Plan for Improving the Situation of Children and Protection of their Rights for 2017–2021⁴.

² UNICEF estimated this percentage based on administrative data from line ministries and child population in poverty reported in household surveys.

³ UNICEF, National study on preventive work with children in conflict with the law in the Republic of Belarus, 2012.

⁴ Approved by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, resolution No. 710 dated 22 September 2017.