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# Child protection: Digital opportunities, challenges and innovations across the Region

## Introduction

In June 2020, the Child Protection section of UNICEF's Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (ECARO) conducted a survey across every country in the Region to find out how governments and partners have been using digital technology to respond to child protection issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey aimed to enhance understanding of the use of digital platforms for child protection and, in particular:

- to examine if and how countries are moving from paper-based case management to online systems
- to explore how digital technologies have been used to increase communication, training, exchanges, and coordination among social work and social service providers, and
- to identify the innovations that have been introduced to overcome particular challenges related to the limitations and restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The information gathered through this survey aims to

- support learning across the region
- identify specific innovations that could be replicated and adapted in other countries, and
- identify trends and opportunities for efficiency gains through greater collective work and regional coordination.

This note summarizes findings from all 23 of the countries in the Region that participated in the survey<sup>1</sup>. It also draws on additional information from a rapid online review of literature and learning related to digital technology and social work case management. It aims to capture the broad lessons emerging from the research so that other countries can review and expand upon the lessons learned.

<sup>1</sup> Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (UNSCR1244), Kyrgyzstan, Republic of North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan – in addition, the UNICEF Italy Refugee and Migrant Response team responded to the survey



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## List of Acronyms

BASW - British Association for Social Work

CM - Case Management

CSEA - Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

ECM/e-CM – electronic case management system

GBV - Gender-Based Violence

IT - Information Technology

MHPSS - mental health and psychosocial support

MoLSP – Ministry of Labour and Social Protection

NGOs - Non-Governmental Organisations

PPE - Personal Protective Equipment

SCIE - Social Care Institute for Excellence

SSWF - Social Services Work Force

**SocSkrb'** - a shortened version of 'social welfare' in Croatian

UNICEF ECARO – United National Children's Fund Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia

UNDP – United National Development Programme

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

VAC - Violence against Children

WFP – World Food Programme

Nadia Bujor, 38 years old holding her girl, Sara, 3 years old, talking to Anozeta Arvinte, Community nurse. The community nurse is asking the mother questions using Aurora app. The app helps social workers and community nurses keep all the information on one family in one place. The Bujor family are from Sohodor, Bacau county, Romania

## Background: What we already knew

There has long been debate in academic literature about how computerized data management systems affect social work organizations and their employees. While the push toward digitalization has yielded benefits, challenges remain, including a pressing need for user-centred design, robust safeguards, and approaches that use technology to complement – rather than supplant – social work capacities.

Such challenges were highlighted by Australian social workers participating in a large study, who reported that data collection technology made them feel less connected with clients and shifted their priorities from the quality of output to the quantity of output.<sup>2</sup> This study underscored the importance of involving front-line social workers from the outset, and particularly in the design stage of any digital platform or the digitalization of case management.

In the United States, 245 community social workers were surveyed to identify the factors that affected their willingness to use client information systems.<sup>3</sup> The study found that their use of data was affected by the extent of their skills and experiences with computers and their perceptions of both the user-friendliness of the systems and the usefulness of the data they were looking at. Similarly, a case study of how a social service organization in Hong Kong practiced knowledge management found that different types of knowledge have different degrees of usefulness in a digital format.<sup>4</sup> The case study noted that information technology (IT) is useful for the storing of and access to items such as meeting minutes and presentation handouts, while other forms of knowledge sharing, such as stories, are harder to digitize because parts of the experience are lost when shared electronically.

A 2019 study in the UK by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and the British Association for Social

Work (BASW) pointed to key factors that can make the transition from paper based to digital case management more effective.<sup>5</sup>

- Workplace systems “should prioritize relationship-based practice and person-centred care over performance management”.
- Systems work better where both practitioners and service users have a genuine co-production role as systems are designed and developed.
- New technologies should augment the work of social workers rather than trying to replace it.
- Service users must have a choice about how they interact with services, and their right to self-determination should be enhanced – rather than limited – by technology.
- Concerns about data security and problems caused by social media must be addressed, such as breaches of the right to privacy and, in some cases, insults and threats being received.

Social workers who participated in workshops as part of the SCIE and BASW study were in general agreement that “digital technologies can enhance social work, sometimes in unexpected ways” – with an example being the use of social media to identify missing children. But participants also said that closer partnerships were needed between technology companies, employer IT departments, practitioners and service users to ensure systems “reflect practice realities”. The design of a digital platform for case management or as a platform for interaction among social work professionals needs the collaboration of social workers from the beginning, so that they gain a sense of buy in and ownership, as well as confidence that the system will respond to the real needs of front-line workers. It is also critical that the digital skill-set of social workers is addressed comprehensively.

<sup>2</sup> Burton, J. & van den Broek, D. (2009). Accountable and countable: Information management systems and the bureaucratization of social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39(7), 1326-1342.

<sup>3</sup> Carrilio, T. E. (2007). Using client information systems in practice settings: Factors affecting social workers' use of information systems. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 25(4), 41-62.

<sup>4</sup> Leung, Z. C. S. (2009). Knowledge management in social work: Types and processes of knowledge sharing in social service organizations. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39(4), 693-709.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/10/14/social-workers-feel-training-provides-digital-readiness-practice-research-finds/>

## Methodology and limitations

To complement existing literature and gain a more focused regional perspective, UNICEF ECARO conducted a survey of UNICEF country offices across the Region. The survey responses were obtained through in-depth key informant interviews with UNICEF child protection professionals. While their responses give valuable insights into the ongoing adaptation of digital tools as of June, 2020, the protracted nature of the

COVID-19 pandemic suggests that this trend may be evolving at speed to meet child protection challenges at a time of crisis, with reduced mobility and the loss of face-to-face contact. We anticipate a significant acceleration of the use of digital tools further, and the need for a follow-up survey after 12 months to shed light on its scale and nature.

## Trends emerging from the Regional Survey

While every country in the region reports varying levels of digital adaptation, they have all developed new ways of working with digital technology during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the use of digital solutions to better reach migrants and refugees in Greece, Turkey and Italy. The only exception is Turkmenistan, where no cases of COVID-19 cases have been reported, and measures to restrict movements have not been seen as necessary.

The following overall trends were observed.

- Broadly speaking, **there has been some progress in five countries (Azerbaijan, Croatia, Kyrgyzstan, Romania and Uzbekistan) in moving from paper-based social work case management systems to online systems.** These countries were already making that transition long before COVID-19. While many of the valuable lessons learned about the sustainability and success of these platforms do not necessarily relate to the current pandemic, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of being able to work remotely, and of using online tools to manage child protection cases.

- **Online platforms were used in all countries to increase communication across social service providers and provide training, capacity building and mentoring.** It is clear that digital platforms now play a critical role in supporting social work practice, knowledge exchange, and capacity building.
- **A number of digital innovations to support child protection can increase cross-country learning and contact.** In some cases, tablets were distributed to children in detention or in residential care so that they could stay connected to their families, friends and service providers during lockdown. In some cases, online check-ins replaced face-to-face check-ins for children on probation.

While many countries face challenges to the universal use of, and access to, digital solutions for child protection, there is clear potential for the expansion of these solutions to provide services and support the social service workforce to reach the most vulnerable children.

## In-depth findings

### 1. Digitalization of social work case management<sup>6</sup>

Case management (CM) continues to be mostly paper-based in this Region, even though it is one of the best digitally connected regions in the world, and most social services still rely heavily on paper-based data entry. CM has, therefore, faced severe constraints as a result of the travel and contact restrictions triggered by the COVID-19

pandemic. Some work continued in one way or another in all 23 countries, including online, despite clear limitations and challenges, but it is clear that some countries were more advanced in their transition to digital platforms before the pandemic and could adapt more readily to a dramatic change in circumstances.

#### Countries where digitalization has progressed

Five countries had pre-existing e-case management systems that were already operational when the pandemic arrived and could be mobilized as part of the response.

- **Azerbaijan** is developing a social work system that extends across the entire country, and uses an electronic case management system (ECM) to monitor social protection services, identify service needs, track the social and referral services provided, and assess outcomes. The ECM follows the standard operating procedures of key social services already provided to the most vulnerable children and their families. The national ECM produces quantitative and qualitative reports that include disaggregated analytical information through dashboards, tabulations and analytical reports. This helps the Government monitor and evaluate the progress and impact of social care services that are funded through the State budget and other resources, and supports policy recommendations for further improvement.
- In **Croatia**, **Application 'SocSkrb'** ('social welfare') is an app that was introduced in 2014 as part of a wider digitalization and reform process. Its aim was to create a single database of all users and enable the exchange of data across all relevant institutions (e.g. tax administration, financial institutions, Ministry of the Interior, etc.) to reduce administration, increase social service efficiency, and prevent the illegal use of the right to cash assistance. New modules have been developed and added to the app in recent years, including modules on case decisions, the right to social services, enhancing professional help and assistance, support for interventions at the family level, and the appropriate use of foster and residential care. At present, the app is used only by centres for social welfare, but there are plans to expand its use to other institutions in the broader social welfare system.
- As a result of data protection and security issues, SocSkrb can only be accessed from an official laptop or computer connected to the Governmental network (Carnet). This was a problem for case workers before COVID-19, making it difficult to enter information in real time while working with clients: they had to take notes and enter the information into the system when they were back in the office. During the COVID-19 lockdown, social workers had to work from home, without access to their offices and networks. In response, the Ministry allowed some key workers to access the app from devices outside of the workplace. This has been an important learning opportunity, highlighting the need to enhance the flexibility of the 'SocSkrb' system and overcome a bottleneck that seems to be security related.
- **Kyrgyzstan** had already put in place an e-case management system (**DolborDB**, e-CM), a special online database platform developed specifically for this country. The system is hosted centrally by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection (MoLSP) and is connected to other sectors and agencies, including the police. The software lists more than 100 categories of vulnerability and generates individual plans based on assessments. The lockdown has pushed the Government to apply this system to an increased number of other districts beyond the capital city, Bishkek.
- In **Romania**, the **Aurora-system** has enabled social workers and community health-care providers to diagnose and monitor the vulnerabilities of children and their families – a system that has continued to operate throughout the crisis. The system helps to determine the minimum and tailored package of services they need, while enabling child protection evaluation and planning work at the national level. The system has some limitations as home visits are required for the

<sup>6</sup> Social work case management is a way to provide a package of services tailored to the specific and often complex needs of a client. A professional social worker assesses the needs of the client and their family when appropriate, and arranges, coordinates, monitors, evaluates, and advocates for interventions by multiple services by actors from a range of sectors.

collection of data, which were difficult – if not impossible – during lockdown. The Government is, however, considering the scale up of the Aurora-system and is exploring the development of a new information management system for children with the support of the funding from the European Union (EU).

- In **Uzbekistan**, UNICEF has introduced the **Primero** software to meet the assessment and ongoing social work needs of a small number of unaccompanied children who have returned from Iraq. Primero is a flexible, open-source software that supports case management, incident monitoring and family tracing

and reunification, and is a cost effective way to move towards a digital online case management system. UNICEF is confident that Primero could be used by state agencies to support their broader work with vulnerable children and families. However, work remains to be done with the Government to explain the benefits of the system, the costs (short, medium and long term) and the support that can be provided by UNICEF and others. There are also challenges around the introduction of what is perceived as UNICEF software in a national context, particularly in relation to vulnerable populations.

## Countries that still rely on paper-based case management systems, but are taking steps towards digital tools

- In **Albania**, ministerial instructions specified case management interventions according to the perceived level of risk, authorizing case management by ‘telephone’ only for cases with low or medium risk or for cases of COVID-19. These instructions do not define what is meant by ‘telephone’ or how it could be used (whether, for example, it includes smart phone web-based applications). For high-risk cases, face-to-face interactions were recommended with the use of Personal Protective (PPE) Equipment. The same instructions specified that technical inter-ministerial working groups will continue to operate through online meetings and consultation.
- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, centres for social welfare that had already been equipped with IT equipment before the pandemic continued their case management for children using Skype, Zoom and other online tools.
- In **Bulgaria**, the law stipulates that states services must have paper-based files. During the pandemic, however, protocols were amended so that professionals could coordinate and agree on actions by email, phone, or Zoom/Skype meetings. While case management and assessments for children at risk were still completed using paper-based forms, documentation could be collected and used from digital sources.
- In **Serbia**, all Centres for Social Welfare were instructed to work online exclusively, with the exception of outreach in cases of violence against children. The work was, for the most part, carried out a basic manner, largely by phone calls and emails.
- In **Ukraine**, Zoom and Skype were used extensively, including in conflict-affected areas in the East. Technology was used creatively – and primarily by social workers and other front-line actors – to connect to vulnerable groups and to community-based decision makers, but also to build capacity in case management.

## 2. Digital technology as a tool for training, coaching or supervision during the pandemic

The crisis has opened and expanded opportunities for training that uses digital platforms. All countries have conducted online trainings and maintained supervision and coaching where feasible. Remote training and support has been embraced as it is cost-effective, quick to organize and deliver and can accommodate and include large numbers of participants who have, in the past, been difficult to reach. Overall, across the region,

there is a willingness to consider sustaining and even expanding online training alongside the traditional face-to-face approaches. In some contexts, some partners (including Non-Governmental Organisations/ NGOs) have remained active and have deployed digital solutions to reach children and families in need of services, as seen in Armenia, Greece, Kazakhstan and Kosovo (UNSCR 1244).

### Preferred technologies

Social media channels, phone messaging applications (WhatsApp, Telegram, emails, etc.) and digital calling platforms (mainly Zoom and Skype) are being used to conduct training and to provide remote supervision and coaching to social workers and social service professionals. In one country, Greece, partners developed podcasts to channel information to communities. Training targeted the childcare providers in the social service workforce (SSWF) and, in some instances, professionals from the justice, health and education sectors.

It has been a challenge to identify dedicated platforms for social work and social service interaction that extend beyond the creative and ad-hoc use of existing social media and phone messaging applications. The one exception is **FPN KonekTaS** in Serbia, established as a specific response to COVID-19. This interactive online platform brings together practitioners, teachers and students of social work and social policy to share new theoretical and practical knowledge, professional experiences and dilemmas, and strategies to overcome not only the obstacles caused by COVID-19, but also the obstacles they face on a daily basis.

The KonekTaS platform and its approach were conceived by a small group of professors and students in the Faculty of Political Science – Department of Social Policy

and Social Work in Belgrade. With support from UNICEF and USAID, the necessary funds were made available to embed the portal into the University's web page, and some technical support was also provided. Between April and July 2020, this initiative reached over 850 practitioners, social service workers and students through 8 webinars, 5 sub-regional meetings (including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia), 10 supervision meetings and 20 discussion groups via the platform. Given the common language and the existing cross-border exchange on social work over the years, it was a natural evolution to connect professionals and academics across the sub-region. Topics covered include: specific techniques for personal mental health care in stressful situations; emergency care and interventions in cases of domestic violence; and information about the role of the Red Cross during the COVID-19 crisis, as well as linkages with social services and case management.

This appears to be a particularly cost-effective and sustainable initiative. It cost around \$15,000 to establish and launch the portal, which is now fully operational and embedded in the Faculty. Some of the running costs are being absorbed by the University, and the additional costs of enhancement, maintenance and coordination are minimal.

## Types of training delivered virtually

- **Mental health and psychosocial support** (Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia<sup>7</sup>, Ukraine<sup>8</sup> and Uzbekistan).
- **Case management** (Albania and Montenegro<sup>9</sup>).
- **Child-safeguarding for SSWF professionals.** This was adapted as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other areas have also been covered, including stress management and socio-psychological first aid. In all, virtual training on these areas reached five times the number of people they would have reached before the pandemic. However, access issues proved very important when trying to reach children directly. This was particularly true for refugee children, who were often unable to access the internet due to a lack of devices and other essentials. In Greece, for example, partners resorted to printing and distributing the materials.
- **Violence against children (VAC) and gender-based violence (GBV) and reception standards in migrant reception centres.** In Italy, the Ministry of Education worked in partnership with a national NGO to collect and amalgamate all of the different e-learning tools. In Italy, the National System for Refugees and Migrants disseminated standards for reception centres. Training in Turkey covered GBV, psychosocial support, foster parenting and more. There was also virtual training on GBV, the prevention of family separation and identification of families at risk in Azerbaijan, Romania<sup>10</sup> and Montenegro.<sup>11</sup>
- Webinars on **cyber-security**, teaching parents how to use the internet safely and gain the trust of their children were conducted, recognizing that parents and children have been spending more time on the internet during the pandemic and that this increases the risk of online violence, such as Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA) and bullying.
- Four training modules were delivered on
  - taking care of children with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic
  - VAC and CM during the pandemic
  - stigma, discrimination and COVID-19, and
  - an introduction to basic psycho-social support for community workers during the pandemic. (Plans are underway for more in-depth training on such topics in Romania).
- **Parenting and positive discipline** (Kazakhstan, Montenegro<sup>12</sup> and Uzbekistan).
- **Calls and on-line consultations** were conducted with various professionals, particularly psychologists, on how best to address the response to COVID-19 and how to provide on-line support to children with disabilities who have had no access to day care services. In Kyrgyzstan, psychologists who had already been trained to work in emergencies were contacted and provided quick information on COVID-19.

## Coaching and supervision

In Tajikistan, rapid capacity building and coaching were provided online to the staff of Child Rights Units on current information related to COVID-19. Remote coaching was also conducted in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia<sup>13</sup> and Uzbekistan, using social media channels and phone messaging apps (such as WhatsApp and Telegram).

The survey also revealed, however, that professionals in some countries, including Tajikistan, are not keen to take part in online training as they do not feel at ease with new

technologies. In some instances, online training supervision was reported to have had limitations, including being inappropriate for skills and participatory training. In addition, not all target groups have the stable internet connection, computers or smart mobile phones that they need to connect to and benefit from online sessions. Findings from Georgia also suggest that online training is not as efficient as face-to-face training and not appropriate if it aims to change attitudes and practices.

It is clear that a great deal of online training has taken

<sup>7</sup> Professionals in small group homes and correctional facilities. In addition, an online session was conducted for 50 adolescents on mental health (mental health seems to have suffered during lockdown, with some reported suicides).

<sup>8</sup> In the East, training sessions were conducted for SSWF professionals and social-service providers on GBV, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), the prevention of violence, positive parenting and more.

<sup>9</sup> Covering 450 volunteers and 100 staff.

<sup>10</sup> VAC and CM in the time of COVID-19.

<sup>11</sup> Eighty (80%) of staff and 50% of volunteers were trained on the prevention of sexual abuse and harassment.

<sup>12</sup> With around 10,000 viewers for the two sessions that were conducted.

<sup>13</sup> 407 professionals, including students of social work were reached.



place during the pandemic. The emerging consensus seems to be that online training may gain traction as an approach that is complementary to face-to-face training and or as an alternative where appropriate. A blend of the two may be the new normal.

### Additional training (at the time inputs were received from UNICEF Country Offices)

- **In Armenia**, the Academy of Justice and the Chamber of Advocates are introducing distance learning on child rights and VAC for all relevant justice professionals, with support from UNICEF. Several NGOs, such as the Association of psychologists and Parents School, have introduced online formats for the delivery of psychosocial support to parents and families affected by COVID-19.
- **In Bosnia and Herzegovina**, a course on supervision for front-line workers is being developed.
- **In Croatia**, UNICEF has new programme cooperation agreements for the organization and delivery of webinars for SSWF professionals to strengthen their capacity to work in 'new normal' conditions, covering online mediation, play therapy with children in lockdown and the management of difficult divorces.
- **In North Macedonia**, online training activities have supported case management and community outreach. In addition, the training of day-care service workers initiated before the pandemic continued online during lockdown.

### 3. Provision of online services and access to professional support

While some services have been delivered remotely, this has not replaced the need for individual, in-person engagement. Countries reported a mix of online and direct service provision and highlighted the use of mobile teams that were, in some cases, created and trained to deliver direct support to link beneficiaries with service providers. The consensus among professionals was that online service delivery cannot and should not replace face-to-face engagement, particularly for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, as few of them have access to IT, smartphones or the internet (as seen in Albania). However, a number of instances of online service provision were reported, as follows.

- In **Greece**, where refugee and migrant children living in shelters could no longer go out, the partners working with them shifted to online counselling.
- In **Kazakhstan**, professionals and NGOs working to support children affected by migration began to use phone counseling, as well as mobile applications for rapid needs assessments.
- In **North Macedonia**, UNICEF provided support to the staff of day-care-centres so that they could, reach out to the families of children with disabilities for the first time, and in particular, families living in distant communities where there were no available services. It seems that the pandemic and the resulting use of digital technology enabled the country's first widespread peer-to-peer interaction and support. Some professionals noted, however, the need for more platforms where they could communicate and voice concerns, rather than platforms for training alone. They felt that it was very important to be able to link to each other.
- In **Serbia**, Viber groups were established to bring together different service providers, enabling them to share information and offer each other peer support. UNICEF supported the University of Belgrade Faculty of Political Science to establish a platform to share information, knowledge and examples of good practice. Facebook-based discussion groups, online discussions and webinars were also introduced and were well received at the beginning, although enthusiasm began to wane as time passed.

The next section outlines the responses to needs of children in different child protection domains.

## 4. Thematic use of digital tools to support child protection

### Violence against children (hotlines and helplines)

Hotlines and helplines have often been used during the pandemic to report cases of violence against and provide information. Some have been adapted or enhanced, as in Belarus, to enable children to air their views, ask questions and receive answers. The extensive availability and use of hotlines was also reported in Moldova for different issues and target groups.

New hotlines are also being developed. In Turkey, for example, a hotline is being developed to respond to COVID-19 cases and for use in other emergencies in the future. This hotline is supported by UNICEF and will be run by the Ministry of Families to provide psychosocial support to its callers. The hotline and associated services will also be available in Arabic for Syrian refugees.

Other examples emerged from our study, as follows.

- In **Armenia**, a centralized hotline was promoted to report all cases of child abuse, building on the existing hotline of the specialized Children's Support Centre in cooperation with the Police. The number of calls served by the hotline tripled since the onset of the Pandemic.

### Institutional care and justice systems

The pandemic has accentuated the need to introduce new approaches to deliver services to children, including children in conflict with the law, via online approaches.

Digital solutions have given children in institutional care and places of detention some support in staying in touch with their families and accessing professional services, as seen in Belarus, Moldova and North Macedonia. Justice systems in several countries ensured a continued response to the needs of these children during lockdown using online alternatives, such as mediation and other legal proceedings (in Tajikistan and Ukraine). Access to legal aid via phone for refugee and migrant children in Greece and Italy, and online testimonies in Croatia were maintained as far as possible. Some additional practices were reported in response to the pandemic restrictions as follows.

- In **Albania**, online support and supervision was provided by State Social Services to children in residential care centres as well as staff during lockdown. UNICEF, the State Agency on the Rights and Protection of the Child and implementing partners organized a series of Webinars via Zoom for Child

- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, UNICEF helped to establish a national Safe Internet Center, and a hotline on online and broader violence, such as CSEA.
- In **Italy**, the Government has created a platform for children and adolescents to provide information on cyber-bullying and grooming, with support from UNICEF. Girls reported an increase in grooming, such as invitations to get married or meet up in secret. UNICEF Italy will also publicize this hotline and its accompanying website.
- In **Tajikistan**, a hotline on GBV has been established as part of the Spotlight initiative and is fully maintained by donor funds. This hotline provided general information to those who called during the pandemic.
- In **Ukraine**, UNICEF has ensured that there is a link between two helplines. The national Child Helpline, which addresses VAC and drug addiction in children and youth has been linked to the hotline for free legal aid to facilitate cross-sectoral referrals.

**Note:** it was observed that in some instances (specifically in Croatia), too many hotlines have been established and beneficiaries are confused about what each hotline offers, leading to some under-utilization.

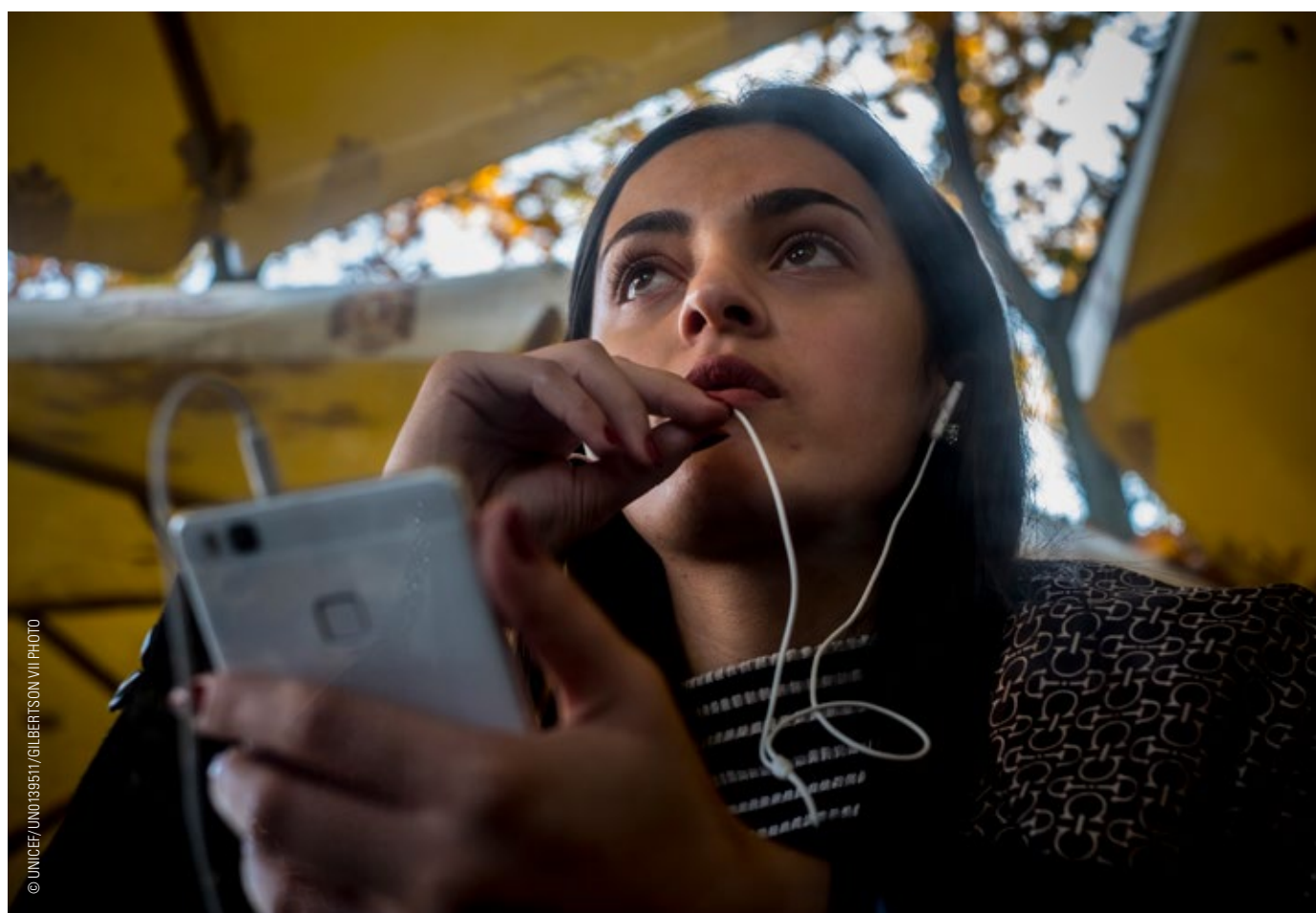
Protection Workers and Child Protection Units to provide support for case management.

- In **Armenia**, probation officers have, primarily, been using remote case management practices.
- In **Belarus**, weekly webinars on psychological issues are being provided for the staff members of residential care institutions to help them cope with the psychological pressures they face.
- In **Croatia**, where children had to appear in court in person to give their testimonies before the pandemic, online testimonies are now the norm.
- In **Kazakhstan**, an online portal has been developed by psychologists to provide counseling to the public, medical staff and teachers. NGOs (within the National Prevention Mechanism) switched to online approaches to monitor the situation in closed institutions and detention centres, following new guidelines developed for this purpose.
- In **Tajikistan**, the justice system continued to respond to the needs of children and youth during lockdown, using online alternatives for mediation and other legal proceedings.

## 5. UNICEF support to the development and implementation of IT solutions

UNICEF is trying to provide or introduce additional IT support to reach the most vulnerable children with digital equipment and solutions in the Europe and Central Asia Region. A number of examples were cited in the survey as follows.

- **Equipping community-centres** for children and families to enable them to use digital methods to access services, and providing children on probation with tablets to keep in touch with their probation officers (Albania).
- **Standardizing the parenting services** provided to families (Croatia).
- **Providing refugee and migrant children with electronic devices** to access e-learning programmes (Greece).
- Using digital solutions to reach out and **support children and families with disabilities** especially in communities where there were no services (North-Macedonia).
- The purchase of smart phones and an internet package by UNICEF so that social workers could stay connected with children repatriated from conflict zones and provide them with CM and other support (e.g. Uzbekistan).



Gabriela Vlad, 17, chats with her mother Svetlana during a break between college classes in Chisinau, Moldova, Wednesday 18 October 2017. Gabriela messages with her mother throughout the day, sending text and photo messages, though video chats are challenging due to Gabriela's data limitations and her mother's poor cell phone connection at the nursing home where she works at in Germany.

## 6. Plans to develop or introduce digital platforms to support the social service workforce

The pandemic has fuelled discussions about how to continue to reach vulnerable children and families while observing public health recommendations and restrictions. A number of plans are being developed to introduce tools that support the SSWF. These include the following.

- UNICEF **Armenia** plans to engage with professional associations to develop and implement digital interventions on positive parenting. UNICEF, WFP and UNDP are supporting the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in the design of a rapid assessment tool and beneficiary registration system to enable remote case management.
  - UNICEF **Azerbaijan** is working with the Government on a social work e-training programme.
  - **Bosnia and Herzegovina** is considering the establishment of a government-managed central platform for service delivery and referrals with centres for social welfare.
  - In **Greece**, the Government is moving many services online (such as access to social security benefits). However, the lack of digital equipment is a challenge for the refugee and migrant population. Some of UNICEF's partners have been trying to provide their beneficiaries with I-Pads, but communication was often one-way from a service delivery point of view. These partners may build on the positive experiences observed in terms of capacity-building of the SSWF. There are also many plans to move more education services online.
  - In **Kazakhstan**, UNICEF and the MoLSP plan to advance e-platforms and tools, including on CM.
  - The Ministry of Social Welfare in **Kosovo** (UNSCR 1244) intends to develop a platform for case management that links to other service providers. A new law on social services features a stronger focus on prevention and digitalization. And social workers will be supported to increase their capacities to use technology.
  - In **Kyrgyzstan**, there are plans to replicate e-case management across the country.
  - Dedicated resources have been allocated to the development of e-learning platforms in **Moldova**.
- UNICEF is engaging with the National Institute of Justice and the Ministry of Health to strengthen their online platforms and is also working to enhance digital capacity for pre- and in-service training of the SSWF.
- The Institute for Social and Child Protection in **Montenegro** is developing a platform for the SSWF to make better use of digital technology. In the second stage of implementation, activities will focus on increasing the capacity of the SSWF to extend their reach to their beneficiaries.
  - The Aurora case-management application developed in **Romania** will be adapted for social workers and other professionals working with the most vulnerable children and families as part of the Child Guarantee intervention. Work is underway to support the MoLSP to develop its human resource strategy for SSWF, in line with the mapping of social workers presented to the Government at the beginning of the lockdown, with a particular focus on digital solutions.
  - Also in **Romania**, digital platforms, such as the existing platform at the University of Bucharest, are to be developed and enhanced for the training and support of the SSWF, but not yet for the beneficiaries. These platforms will be used for initial education (long-distance courses for social work and continuous education) for professionals who are already active in the system.
  - Plans are underway in **Serbia** to create a structured online training platform, building on the temporary 'soft' online approach developed during the crisis. The social welfare system needs to modernize, reinforcing the urgent need for an online training platform for continuous professional development. It is envisaged that this platform will be set up with the Republican Institute for Social Protection, with some essential and accredited training programmes shifted to online training courses.
  - The Ministry of Public Education in **Uzbekistan** is very interested in moving from traditional, paper-based ways of collecting data and CM to online and digital alternatives. The process was already underway but came to a halt as a result of the inability of other sectors to absorb digital solutions.

## 7. Challenges and gaps identified by countries

While the transition to digital support and case management holds significant promise, the transition and implementation of user-centred approaches remains a challenge. UNICEF Offices reported a number of difficulties associated with these rollouts as follows.

- In some countries where case management is digitalized, **remote access to digital platforms or the use of digital solutions by social workers is a challenge** as a result of lack of computer literacy and skills, connectivity problem, a lack of digital devices and the fact that, in some cases, the e- system could not be accessed offsite because of data protection concerns.
- In almost all instances, **remote, digital solutions would not work for the most vulnerable children** and their families, given their lack of equipment and access and constraints to their utilization of such solutions. At the beginning of the crisis, for example, 45% of (school-aged) children in Georgia were not enrolled in online-schooling opportunities. Most of the vulnerable children would not benefit from the education-programmes that went online – a problem that was also likely also apply to their access to other services. In Ukraine, children with disabilities and children from extremely vulnerable and at-risk families seem to be excluded from such opportunities (including the education portals), even though the country itself is very well connected.
- Most countries **lack the normative frameworks and specific regulations that are needed**, including the organizational policies required to guide online service delivery and the implementation of digital solutions. Public and private users were also concerned about the safety and confidentiality of data. In many countries, no guidance was provided on how the workforce would continue to operate during the crisis. Many countries have had to undertake legal amendments to support digital solutions, including amendments to address issues around confidentiality and safety.
- **There is a chronic lack of funding for the development and maintenance of digital solutions for children protection**, whether from UNICEF or from central government. As a result, some countries across the region have no obvious plans to create or introduce digital technologies to support the SSWF.

While almost every country in Central Asia is making progress on digitalization as a priority area for governments, and despite the obvious need to mobilize alternative ways to deliver services to the most vulnerable children, the social welfare sector is not seen as a priority area for government support for innovative IT solutions. Turkmenistan faces particular challenges: strict censorship means that there are no IT innovations, and no plans to develop this area in the foreseeable future. Lack of access to the internet is another challenge to the introduction of new solutions in Turkmenistan and it is the only country in the Region with no digital alternatives at all in the area of child protection.

- **There is still a pressing need for overall guidance and strategy.** While almost all countries have enforced lockdown measures, only a few countries (Albania, Croatia, Georgia, North Macedonia and Romania) elaborated how the SSWF would continue to operate during the crisis. There was often a lack of perspective in terms of what the workforce would do after the crisis, as well as a lack of digital solutions available to them and to the vulnerable families and children they support.
- One critical issue that must be noted as digitalization becomes integral to work on child protection is that **the move towards greater digitalization must go hand-in-hand with efforts to improve the capacity, skills and equipping of the SSWF.** There is some resistance from the more traditional members of the workforce not only to the use of IT technologies, but also to other innovative reform processes. For some, digitalization is considered an additional burden. Despite the obvious need to adapt and look for alternatives as outlined in this paper, there was little or no evidence from many countries in the Region that governments were likely to invest significantly in digital solutions for the SSWF. In Kazakhstan for example, there is a mismatch between innovations and the ability of the state system to operate in an incremental way to introduce innovations. In Tajikistan, digital solutions cannot be applied in any region because of difficulties with internet access, particularly in remote areas. Such challenges are compounded by the traditional mind-sets of many professionals and service providers, which do not allow for innovative IT training and digital solutions.

Cover photo: Lesson in process at the Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI) resource center for patronage nurses, psychologists, social workers and doctors in Kyzylorda, Kazakhstan on 13 March 2018.



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