

Evaluation Management Response Document

Region: ECAR

Office: Croatia

Evaluation Year: 2021

Evaluation Title: Multi-country evaluation of the UNICEF Early Childhood Development response to COVID-19 in Europe and Central Asia region: Croatia Country Case Study

Person In Charge For Follow Up to Management Response: Djurdjica Ivkovic

Overall response to evaluation

UNICEF Country Office in Croatia considers the evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations relevant and of good quality. The methodology applied and insights gained ensured sufficient information to inform recommendations and lead further programming efforts, particularly related to the crisis context, such as the global pandemic which was an overarching factor for this multi-country evaluation. Even though all countries involved had some specifics regarding applied ECD programme design and implementation, the evaluation contributed to mutual learning. The process was highly participatory and the RO Evaluation team, that managed the process, ensured high quality and adequate support. The evaluation analysis and reporting were commissioned in a few cycles, thus ensuring more opportunities for COs to introduce adjustment to interventions if needed. Still, having in mind the fast-changing environment and the evolving nature of the pandemic, more swift delivery of recommendations could be beneficial for COs in similar future processes. Also, most of the recommendations refer to UNICEF's advocacy role for enhancing targeted ECD policies and practices which require long-term efforts to reach tangible results. Therefore, in the Evaluation Management Response Plan, the CO focused on the immediate opportunities and actions that will lead toward the desired changes.

Planned Use of the Evaluation

Being commissioned as developmental evaluation, some findings and recommendations have been already utilised to inform/adjust specific COVID-19 related interventions in 2021. The evaluation also ensured valuable insights regarding overall ECD system's strengths and weaknesses which contributed to the new CP 2023-2027 evidence-based planning process. Findings and recommendations have been shared with all relevant partners, with ministries of education, welfare and health being recognised as main users of the evaluation's finding for ensuring required ECD/ECI policy and programmes' improvements. UNICEF CO will also continue to utilise generated knowledge to lead its advocacy and policy advice efforts in ECD/ECI, thus contributing to children's wellbeing in Croatia.

Recommendations and Actions

No.	Recommendations/Actions	Responsible Section (Action)	Responsible Person Name (Action)	Expected Completion (Action)	Mgt Response / Implementation Stage	Reason/Action Taken
1	Evaluation Recommendation or Issue 1: Continue advocacy and technical support to the Government to build a national, coordinated, and multi-sectoral system for ECI, which ensures quality services for children with developmental difficulties: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocate for sufficient budgetary allocation for ECI services, including coverage of costs related to virtual services, e.g., equipment and connectivity. • Continue making efforts to improve coordination for ECI at local and national levels and advocating for common guidelines and standards for quality service: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engage the national Government, including the National ECI Commission, in locally-focused efforts to develop models of ECI financing and coordination to ensure buy-in. A working group consisting of members of the central and local governments could be formed for this purpose. - Support the Government to improve the collaboration of ECI professionals with all home-visit based services to improve outreach and recognition • Support the Government of Croatia to establish a sustainable system for ensuring the supply of qualified ECI service providers skilled in virtual ECI service provision and use of AAC technologies in ECI practice: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expand partnerships with academic institutions to strengthen capacity building of practitioners on ECI, including virtual ECI provision and use of AAC technologies. - Advocate for including in the professional competencies for ECI practitioners' knowledge and skills for use of communication and information technologies in early childhood intervention. • Provide support to the Government in conducting an appropriate assessment of ECI needs of young children with disabilities and developmental delays and their families, with a focus on the most vulnerable and those living in remote areas and humanitarian/emergencies 				Agree	
1.1	Conduct in-depth research that analyses policies, services, and mechanisms and identifies barriers to children's access to services in various thematic areas, including the area of early childhood intervention. The in-depth research findings will help the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Social Welfare to identify policy measures within the Croatian National Action Plan on Child Guarantee and in securing the provision of ECI.	UNICEF Croatia CO	Melani Markovic	3/30/2022	Completed	Provided technical inputs to the Deep Dive and Policy brief related to the health and social services

1.2	Provide technical support to the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Social Welfare in defining key policy measures within the Croatian Child Guarantee National Action Plan supporting the development of the ECI system in Croatia.	UNICEF Croatia CO	Melani Markovic	3/30/2022	Completed	Draft of the policy measures related to the health and ECI shared with the Ministry of Health
1.3	Conduct consultations with the Ministry of Health, as a lead Ministry for the Governmental cross-sectoral Early Childhood Intervention Commission, to apply for the Technical support instrument (TSI) program to implement the Croatian Child Guarantee National Plan, precisely policy measures related to the development of the ECI system.	UNICEF Croatia CO	Djurdjica Ivkovic, Melan Markovic	12/30/2023	Completed	At the technical and higher level, the CO had several discussions with the MoH on developing an integrated ECI system through TSI 2023 Flagship Technical Support Project and National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026. However, the MoH decided that other healthcare-related priorities would be applied to the TSI.
1.4	Prepare with the Ministry of Health a joint application for the Technical support instrument (TSI) program to implement the Croatian Child Guarantee National Plan, precisely policy measures related to the development of the ECI system	UNICEF Croatia CO	Djurdjica Ivkovic, Melan Markovic	12/30/2023	Cancelled	At the technical and higher level, the CO had several discussions with the MoH on developing an integrated ECI system through TSI 2023 Flagship Technical Support Project and National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026. However, the MoH decided that other healthcare-related priorities would be applied to the TSI.
1.5	Conduct consultations with the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, the University of Zagreb, on setting up a Lifelong learning study programme on AAC and integrating the use of communication and information technologies in ECI within the Postgraduate specialist study Early Intervention in Educational Rehabilitation	UNICEF Croatia CO	Djurdjica Ivkovic, Melan Markovic	12/30/2023	Completed	The Centre for Lifelong Learning, part of the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, offers a course called "Encouraging Social Communication in Children with Developmental Disabilities and Delays" twice a year. This course is designed to provide professionals with the opportunity to continuously specialize their current knowledge and skills. It also introduces new intervention methods for working directly with beneficiaries, allowing professionals to gain new professional competencies. In addition, a University manual was developed to be used in the Postgraduate specialist study of Early Intervention.
1.6	Conduct an assessment of the piloted model of comprehensive and integrated ECI service and ECI/ECD outreach model within Phase III – Testing the Child Guarantee in Croatia to provide evidence to inform policy development related to ECI provision and model replication at regional and local levels for the ECI Commission and local/regional governments	UNICEF Croatia CO	Djurdjica Ivkovic, Melan Markovic	3/30/2023	Completed	ToR for the assessment of the integrated ECI services model drafted. Assessment completed.

1.7	Conduct a study on parents' and caregivers' knowledge, attitudes, practices, socio-cultural and gender norms related to ECD and ECI, with a focus on the most vulnerable and those living in remote areas and humanitarian/emergencies to provide evidence-based data to policymakers on developing integrated ECI system	UNICEF Croatia CO	Djurdjica Ivkovic,Melan Markovic	12/30/2023	Completed	Part of the parents' and caregivers' knowledge, attitudes, practices, socio-cultural and gender norms related to ECD will be included in the Research on parents' and caregivers' knowledge, attitudes, practices, socio-cultural and gender norms associated with violence against children and adolescents, conducted by the CP section.
2	Evaluation Recommendation or Issue 2: Advocate for quality standards, legal provisions, budget allocations, and conditions for ECI services that facilitate the provision of virtual early intervention: • Support the Government in defining quality standards for virtual early intervention and child-sensitive and gender-sensitive early implementation guidelines. • Advocate for the provision of ICT support for families, with a priority for families with children with disabilities and children living in poverty. This may require specific strategies such as priority queues and delivery of goods directly to children and their families.				Agree	
2.1	Provide technical support to the Ministry of Health, through the TSI programme, as a lead Ministry for the Governmental cross-sectoral Early Childhood Intervention Commission, on defining quality standards for virtual early intervention and child-sensitive and gender-sensitive early implementation guidelines, as part of the development of national standards for ECI.	UNICEF Croatia CO	Djurdjica Ivkovic,Melan Markovic	12/30/2023	Completed	At the technical and higher level, the CO had several discussions with the MoH on developing an integrated ECI system through TSI 2023 Flagship Technical Support Project and National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026. However, the MoH decided that other healthcare-related priorities would be applied to the TSI.
2.2	Include socio-cultural and gender norms related to ECD and ECI, the use of ICT by families with children with disabilities and children living in poverty, within the upcoming research on parents' and caregivers' knowledge, attitudes, practices, to provide evidence-based data for policymakers in developing a strategy to address digital literacy and access to the ICT for the most vulnerable groups.	UNICEF Croatia CO	Djurdjica Ivkovic,Melan Markovic,Mar Tomic-Latinac,Marije Salinovic	12/30/2023	Completed	Socio-cultural and gender norms related to Early Childhood Development (ECD) will be investigated in research on parents' and caregivers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices, as well as socio-cultural and gender norms associated with violence against children and adolescents.
3	Evaluation Recommendation or Issue 3: Support the Government to ensure universal access to AAC devices for children with disabilities and developmental delays and their families: • Advocate for legal changes that ensure access of children to AAC, including eligibility criteria and mechanisms for provision of AAC devices. • Advocate for including AAC in the national lists of assistive devices of the Croatian Health Insurance Fund and providing them free of charge or at subsidised costs to children with developmental difficulties and disabilities. • Include AAC in the relevant guidelines, standards for provision of ECI services.				Agree	

3.1	Update draft of the Recommendations for improving services and access to assisted communication and assistive technology for communication within the social, health, and educational sector as per evaluation recommendations.	UNICEF Croatia CO	Djurdjica Ivkovic,Melan Markovic	12/30/2023	Completed	As a result of the advocacy efforts of various stakeholders, including UNICEF, the National development plan for the education system, for the period until 2027, now includes access to AAC devices and support for children with disabilities. The aim is to ensure communication for students with developmental disabilities through various AAC options. Additionally, educational workers will receive professional development to use digital (assistive) technologies. The recommendations on AAC, developed by UNICEF, will be regularly updated to reflect changes in the environment.
3.2	Facilitate discussion on the inclusion of the AAC in the national lists of assistive devices of the Croatian Health Insurance Fund Organise with the AAC Programme Board and/or relevant ministries and agencies regarding needed legal changes to ensure access of children to AAC, including eligibility criteria and mechanisms for the provision of AAC devices.	UNICEF Croatia CO	Djurdjica Ivkovic,Melan Markovic	12/30/2023	Completed	Various stakeholders, including UNICEF, have been advocating for the inclusion of AAC devices and support for children with disabilities in the health, social and education sectors. As a result, the new National Development Plan for the education system, which covers the period until 2027, aims to ensure that students with developmental disabilities have access to communication by incorporating AAC devices in the learning process. Furthermore, educational workers will receive professional development to learn how to use digital assistive technologies in the educational process to better support children with complex communication needs.
4	Evaluation Recommendation or Issue 4: Support the Government to raise awareness among caregivers on the importance of early intervention and the benefits of the family-centered approach: • Consider engaging the caregivers of children with disabilities and developmental delays in the piloting of ECI models and development of local actions plans. • Consider creating opportunities for participation of Roma caregivers in the early education of their children to improve their awareness about early learning. Ensure that these efforts are community-based and involve leaders in the Roma communities.				Agree	
4.1	Include caregivers of children with disabilities and developmental delays in piloting of integrated model of ECI service and ECD/ECI outreach model within Phase III – Testing the Child Guarantee in Croatia and development of regional ECI action plan	UNICEF Croatia CO	Djurdjica Ivkovic,Melan Markovic	12/30/2023	Completed	Testing of the integrated and coordinated early childhood intervention (ECI) services - The Model aimed to enhance access to early childhood intervention (ECI) services for children aged 0-7 who faced developmental difficulties or disabilities or were at risk of them, along with their families. The key objectives were to improve service coordination and integration, enhance the expertise of professionals in health, education, and social protection, provide

parental support, and enhance social planning in Medimurje County. An analysis conducted in 2020 revealed that ECD/ECI services in the County were only accessible to 50% of children who required them, in addition to considerable delays in referring children to ECI services. This discrepancy disproportionately affected disadvantaged groups, particularly Roma children, who were frequently excluded. To address these challenges, the implementation strategy relied on evidence-based approaches. The project also incorporated participatory planning in regional policy development, fostering greater collaboration and engagement. As a result of these efforts, significant achievements have been realized. These include: - 1,110 children and 917 caregivers were directly reached through improved community-based ECI/ECD services and support. Among these, 358 young children and 363 caregivers were directly reached through improved community-based ECI/ECD intensive services and support. 80% of children showed improvement in 2 developmental domains, demonstrating positive outcomes of the model and showcasing the effectiveness of targeted interventions. - 2,220 children and 1,834 caregivers have been indirectly reached by the ECD/ECI outreach team. - 127 expectant mothers were provided with newborn packages, while 280 infants and young children received toys, didactic materials and picture books according to their developmental needs. - Medical equipment for newborns and young children, such as scales, a portable vaccine refrigerator, and a pulse oximeter, was provided to enhance the capabilities of 18 home-visiting nurses, 2 paediatric practitioners, and 6 family doctors at the County Health Centre. - 4,488 services and counselling sessions were provided to children and parents/caregivers by the ECD/ECI outreach team. This comprehensive assistance has played a vital role in addressing the

						<p>community's diverse needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- A comprehensive guideline for implementing a "child find and outreach ECI/ECD support program" was developed. This guideline focuses on early detection and intervention for children at risk of disability or developmental delays, particularly those living in impoverished and isolated areas.- A guideline for implementing home-based and community-based ECI services was established. This guideline is a framework for delivering ECI services in natural environments, ensuring tailored support for children and families.- 190 professionals in education, social welfare, healthcare, and other relevant fields enhanced their skills and knowledge through two online courses (consisting of 15 interactive self-paced modules) and face-to-face workshops. These capacity-building efforts have covered early detection, ECI practices, AAC, supporting young children and parents, addressing discrimination and stigma, and promoting cross-sectoral cooperation.- An Action Plan for the Provision of Integrated and Coordinated ECI Services in Medjmurje County was developed. This plan outlines the strategies and steps required to ensure the sustainable delivery of high-quality ECI services, benefiting the community. In July 2023, the Medjmurje County Assembly showed their commitment to promoting the best possible development for young children by officially endorsing the Action Plan for Early Childhood Intervention for the years 2023 to 2027. This Action Plan sets a precedent as the first of its kind and can serve as an excellent example for other countries to follow.
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4.2	Set up within the Roma communities, and with the support of the local government, Play Hubs and Toy Libraries as places for non-formal education of young children (aged 3-6 years) and socialising with peers, and increasing awareness of parents on early learning and the importance of play. The Play Hubs and Toy Libraries will be realised within the pilot program Phase III: Testing the Child Guarantee in Croatia.	UNICEF Croatia CO	Djurdjica Ivkovic,Melan Markovic	12/30/2023	Completed	Testing of Quality pre-primary education – This model of service focused on creating conditions so that disadvantaged children aged 3-6, can have effective access to pre-primary education, to prevent social exclusion and early school dropout, through supporting pilot kindergartens close to vulnerable communities and four Play Hubs. This has been done by pre-primary and preschool teachers, primary school teachers, kindergarten teachers and students studying to become pre-primary teachers. They were all accompanied by Roma facilitators who acted as interpreters and assistants. In addition to the Play Hubs, which are physical spaces for regular informal play and learning opportunities, informal play and learning have been organised in outside spaces, as well as in the five Centres for Children and Families. There are now 8 physical spaces for providing informal play and learning, providing access for informal play and learning to 683 preschool children without access to kindergarten.
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