Europe and Central Asia

Update on the context and trends

Despite notable progress, many children in the region still live in poverty, lack equal access to quality services, and suffer discrimination, abuse, exploitation and violence. Disadvantaged children include those from low-income families and ethnic communities, children with disabilities, those living in residential care and detention centres, migrant and refugee children, children affected by natural disasters and children in conflict zones.

Despite the Committee on the Rights of the Child's recurring recommendations to improve data collection on children, it needs to be more systematic throughout the region. A child rights monitoring framework has been developed to advance regional data collection and analysis.

About 22 million children in UNICEF programme countries live below national poverty lines. In 2021, 24 per cent of children (19.6 million) in the European Union were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 21 per cent of adults, with the highest proportions of children recorded in Romania (42 per cent), Spain (33 per cent) and Bulgaria (33 per cent).

The war in Ukraine is having a devastating impact on children. Children have witnessed and experienced unimaginable consequences of the war. As of November 2022, 7.7 million children inside and outside Ukraine urgently needed humanitarian assistance and protection, including specialised assistance for unaccompanied and separated children, psychosocial and gender-based violence support, access to critical health, education, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), as well as social protection services.

Moreover, the rising inflation has driven millions more children into poverty throughout the region.

In addition to the unprecedented arrivals of refugees from Ukraine, throughout 2022, an estimated 321,918 refugees and migrants[1] arrived in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria,[2] Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro - an 86 per cent increase in arrivals compared to 2021. As of July 2022, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were reported to be hosting nearly 26,000 Afghan people[3],[4], while refugee children and families from Afghanistan temporarily residing in Albania and North Macedonia continued to require support to access critical services.

Although Europe and Central Asia Region (ECAR) includes countries with the lowest proportion of infant and child deaths globally, some countries have higher under-five mortality rates than the global average, with more than half of the deaths resulting from preventable and treatable diseases. Two-thirds of new-born deaths could be prevented if effective health interventions were provided. ECAR did not register a dramatic reduction in regional routine immunisation coverage because of COVID-19; Still, a decreasing trend has been recorded, resulting in almost one million children not receiving all recommended vaccinations.

Poor nutrition is a significant public health concern in ECAR, particularly childhood overweight and obesity, which can result in severe conditions, including type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. Many children in European countries do not meet recommended levels of physical activity (one in three children aged 6-9 are overweight or obese).

Mental health challenges among children, resulting from the prolonged COVID containment measures and exposure to war or other traumas, have increased in the region. Suicides among adolescents are increasing in several countries, requiring improved support integrated across different sectors.

Challenges persist in education. Pre-primary education accounts for 55 per cent of out-of-school children. Roma children in Europe, in particular, are less likely to attend school and more likely to drop out without acquiring foundational skills. Moreover, almost one-quarter of young people in the region are not in education, employment or training.

ECAR still has among the highest rates of children separated from their families and in residential care worldwide. Also, many unaccompanied and separated migrant and refugee children live in sub-standard reception facilities, while others fall through the cracks in child protection systems.

Violent discipline against children at home is commonplace across the region. MICS data in selected countries revealed boys experiencing more and different types of violence than girls. Child marriage prevalence is lower than in most other parts of the world and has fallen across the region since 2000. However, recent events may lead to increasing poverty and social exclusion, the main factors contributing to child marriage. The prevalence of child marriage has consistently been much higher among the Roma population, with more than one-fifth of Roma women married or in a union before the age of 15.

The region has some of the world's highest adolescent suicide rates, particularly for boys and those from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) community. LGBTQI adolescents and young people face violence, discrimination and rejection for not conforming to dominant social norms, making them more vulnerable to increased health risks due to a lack of access to appropriate life-skills education and health services.

Discrimination against girls undermines equity and sustainable development, particularly for disadvantaged girls. In extreme cases, son preference results in sex-selective termination of pregnancies, leading to skewed population sex ratios in some countries.

Children with disabilities face multiple rights violations, ranging from a lack of early detection or diagnosis of their conditions, to being excluded from education and their communities. Across the region, about 11 million children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to stigma and discrimination.

Air pollution is the most significant environmental risk in the region, with about 83 per cent of children breathing polluted air. Monitoring, forecasting and early warning for natural hazards in the region have improved but have not been matched sufficiently by disaster risk reduction measures to equip communities with the knowledge and skills they need to protect themselves.

[1] Sources: UNHCR, IOM, Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum, Greek Special Secretariat for Unaccompanied Minors, Italian Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, Bulgarian Ministry of Interior and State Agency for Refugees, Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Border Police and Ministry of Interior in Montenegro.
[2] For Bulgaria, this only includes the number of asylum-seekers; the number of arrivals is estimated to be much larger.
[3] Situation Afghanistan situation (unhcr.org)
[4] The ECAR preparedness and response activities for Afghan refugees in Central Asia are covered under the Afghanistan Outflow HAC 2022.

Major contributions and drivers of results

The Ukraine refugee response dominated ECARO's work in 2022. ECARO used humanitarian thematic funds to facilitate coordination and capacity strengthening for the response inside Ukraine and across 19 refugee-receiving countries. In countries with no UNICEF country program presence before the war, ECARO established four Refugee Response Offices (RROs). The Regional Office support and coordination was provided to countries to accommodate an initial refugee influx of more than five million women and children within weeks of the escalation of the Ukraine war.

Goal Area 1 - Thriving
ECARO's health and nutrition programme expanded to provide broader support to the cross-sectoral Thrive agenda. Quality improvement of perinatal care efforts were supported in multiple countries; adolescent and mental health were supported with country-level initiatives to make services user friendly for young people and increase health promotion activities; developmental monitoring, early childhood interventions and promotion of good parenting practices continued to be embedded in primary healthcare services; technical assistance was provided for the definition and costing of essential packages of health services for mothers and children through home visiting services.

This complemented ongoing support in immunisation, HIV, school feeding and food systems. With RO support, thirteen priority countries submitted "Every New-born Action Plan" and "Ending Preventable Maternal Mortality" tracking tools, which will serve to identify priorities to accelerate the progress of set targets and milestones. Progress was also achieved through digital solutions and social and behavioural change efforts in primary healthcare. The Nutrition Platform in Central Asia keeps providing a multi-country platform to expand capacity and strengthen advocacy around nutrition in the sub-region.

The year's focus was on addressing lapsed immunisation coverage alongside continued support for the COVID-19 vaccine rollout. Over US$3 million were mobilised to support priority middle-income countries in addressing lapses in immunisation coverage. In addition, with RO support, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan developed costed national immunisation strategies to reach unvaccinated children.

The Ukraine emergency response focused on ensuring access to essential commodities and healthcare services – including immunisation – both in Ukraine and among refugee populations in neighbouring countries. Together with the Ministries of Health and municipalities in Czechia, Poland and Slovakia, UNICEF provided access to primary health services to 391,467 children and women from Ukraine, and infant and young child feeding counselling to over 7,500 mothers and caregivers.

Goal Area 2 - Learning
In 2022, ECARO worked to accelerate inclusive quality education for children, supporting access to learning for Ukrainian refugee children through regional guidance, coordination, and technical assistance with country offices and partners, including UNHCR.

ECARO deepened the collaboration with the European Union through two Technical Support Instruments on early childhood education and care (ECEC) and engagement with the EU ECEC Working Group. The RO technically supported national education reforms in sector planning, digital learning, inclusive education, and safe and healthy environments with an equity focus, while promoting regional momentum toward SDG4 through inter-agency coordination at United Nations events, including the Transforming Education Summit and the World Conference on ECEC.

UNICEF supported efforts to help Ukrainian refugee children enrol in national education systems and secure continued access to accredited learning. ECARO developed regional guidance on refugee education responses, coordinated regional back-to-learning campaigns, implemented regional coordination mechanisms, conducted fact-finding and needs assessment surveys, and provided technical assistance to expand access to ECEC, digital learning and language support.

ECARO provided technical support to RROs to strengthen their capacities to engage systematically with municipalities and governments to reform and reinforce ECEC systems, including preschool, day-care and nursery. At the onset of the crisis, ECARO provided surge support to ensure ECEC was a crucial part of UNICEF's response to support Ukrainian children and their mothers and worked to ensure that the ECEC component in RROs was fully staffed, equipped, skilled, confident and ready to deepen UNICEF's technical engagement.

ECARO mapped inclusive education interventions across the region, highlighting areas for further support, teacher education, needs assessment, special school transformation and financing. ECARO prioritised support for countries expanding inclusive education and building national capacity to use assistive technology to educate children with disabilities. These include Serbia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Poland.

Learning support was a critical component of the Refugee Response. In Poland, 900,000 children gained access to learning opportunities through formal and informal programmes whereas in Czechia, 32,846 children and adolescents, including 294 Roma refugee children were supported. In Slovakia and Hungary, UNICEF worked with municipalities and NGOs to develop and scale up informal learning opportunities and expand capacities for school enrolment and innovative services to promote child learning and development. More needs to be done to enrol children into formal education systems in host countries.

Goal Area 3 - Protecting: Protection and Migration
ECARO continued supporting deinstitutionalisation and childcare reform. Work on the European Child Guarantee (ECG) progressed, and the ECG Council Recommendation was approved. Seven pilot member states developed and submitted their ECG National Action Plans (NAP), accompanied by monitoring and evaluation frameworks, supported by UNICEF country offices and the Regional Office. UNICEF supported Ukrainian refugee response countries in developing their NAPs and incorporate refugee response into these plans. Over 18 integrated models of services were developed, tested and integrated into mainstream service provision and included for financing through NAPs.

A partnership with New York's Columbia University School of Social Work was completed across nine countries to support national social work universities and professionals at the in-service level. The Western Balkans and Türkiye strengthened their national reporting and referral mechanisms, including helplines for vulnerable children and families. These countries also developed online platforms for professionals, including crisis tools. Offices in Central Asia continued their engagement with national child protection systems to ensure the stigma-free reintegration of children returned from Syria and Iraq.

Following the successful provision of technical support to the Slovak Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family last year, the European Commission requested UNICEF Regional Office to provide another round of technical assistance to Slovakia on the social inclusion of children with disabilities in the substitute-care system.

With UNHCR, ECARO quickly activated Blue Dots – locations for children and mothers to seek safety and access critical information and for screenings for trafficking and separation from family in countries receiving Ukrainian refugees. By December 2022, 41 Blue Dots had served nearly a million children and their caregivers.

Goal area 5. Equity: Social Protection, Child Poverty, and Investments in Children
Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, there has been an overall regression in global and regional child poverty outcome progress. Economic inequalities have also deepened. Although child poverty data from across the region is not captured year-on-year, it seems unlikely that progress was made against the overall deliverable of reducing child poverty by 2025. As concluded in the ECARO-Innocenti report on child poverty and the impacts of the war and the food and fuel crisis, six million additional children in ECA are likely to experience poverty because of compounding crises.

Countries across the region made progress in social protection coverage for children. More than 2.3 million additional children will have access to child and family benefits in 2022 because of UNICEF's technical assistance and advocacy. There were successes in improving systems' benefits and quality, including shock responsiveness and digitalisation. In the public finance space, successful advocacy with the IMF, achievement on SDG fund projects, and the development of clear public finance for

child action plans to frame the future children's funding agenda were notable achievements.

UNICEF established 39 new partnerships with local authorities and municipalities in eight countries[1] hosting refugees from Ukraine to expand services for children and caregivers. The cross-sectoral response through sub-national systems was aligned with efforts to bridge the humanitarian-development nexus and promote the localization agenda. Through these partnerships, 1,193,222 people in municipalities received basic social services and supplies. Over 106,000 refugee and vulnerable host community households in six countries[2] were reached with cash assistance interventions by UNICEF and partners.

2.1 Gender dimension
ECARO supported the completion of over 95 per cent of gender work plan activities in the region for 2022 and the integration of a gender dimension into country planning documents and result frameworks. Key results include technical support to 11 country offices for gender analysis and implementation of country programmes and three countries for planned annual Gender Programmatic Reviews. Capacity sessions on gender were provided to all 23 country offices, along with the rollout of the Regional Gender Strategy, the Adolescent Girls Strategy, institutional benchmarks and the Gender Action Plan, with change pathways and partnerships for addressing gender equality. Gender integration in Ukraine's refugee response was strengthened with guidance on gender and the Core Commitments for Children.

2.2 Humanitarian situation
Seventeen European countries received comprehensive support to respond to the Ukrainian refugee crisis: Ukraine, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Georgia, Italy, Montenegro, Serbia, Türkiye, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, ECARO directly delivered services and provided multi-sectoral technical assistance in the four RRO countries and Italy (which already had a field presence).

Additional critical support was provided for other ongoing or new emergencies in 2022. In Italy 9,449 children were reached with child protection support, including MHPSS, legal counselling, and case management, 1,938 children and adolescents accessed skills development programmes, 9,500 adolescents benefitted from enhanced participation, social inclusion and empowerment while 255,995 people were reached with messages on prevention and access to services and 52,802 people engaged in the promotion of positive messages for the social inclusion of young migrants and refugees. North Macedonia and Albania country offices continued supporting Afghan refugees who arrived in September and October 2021. Following civil unrest in Kazakhstan, ECARO provided support for security, operations, ICT and business continuity to the country office, which delivered a swift response to affected families and children including essential food and nutrition, hygiene and education supplies. The regional partnership with International Federation of Red Crescent Society and Red Crescent Societies in Central Asia, entered a third year, enabling continued preparedness, disaster risk reduction activities and timely response in emergencies (floods, mudflows, landslides in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, conflict along the border of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). ECARO continued to provide technical support in WASH, emergency coordination and response, child protection, health and education and assisted with humanitarian coordination, resource mobilisation, reporting and appeals development.

In Poland, UNICEF signed workplans with 12 municipalities hosting 70 per cent of the refugee population and established presences in Krakow, Warsaw, and Gdansk to monitor and respond to the humanitarian situation. Cooperation agreements were signed by the Ministries of Justice, Family and Social Policy, Health, and Education. In seven UNICEF-UNHCR Blue Dots, 430,859 refugees (146,664 children) received support services. UNICEF provided access to primary health care services to over 338,000 women and children through municipalities and delivered over 55,000 doses of vaccines to help ensure the vaccination of around 25,000 refugee children against polio and 5,000 against Hepatitis A. UNICEF supported national authorities in enrolling close to 200,000 children in the Polish education system. Sixty-six thousand children and caregivers benefitted from water,

sanitation and hygiene (WASH) supplies and services in four municipalities.

In the Czech Republic, UNICEF signed a cross-sectoral agreement with the Municipality of Prague targeting over 30,000 children through early learning, education, child protection, health, adolescent empowerment, integration, and social cohesion among refugee children and host communities. As a result, the Ministry of Health supported the establishment of nine paediatric and adult outpatient centres in university hospitals nationwide, providing primary health care services to 10,445 children and women and vaccinating over 330 children. A total of 32,846 children and adolescents, including 294 vulnerable Roma children, were enrolled in Czech schools.

In Slovakia, formal cooperation was established with two municipalities, reaching close to 11,000 children from Ukraine. In cooperation with municipalities and national civil society organisations, UNICEF-UNHCR Blue Dots served 67,839 children and caregivers. In addition, UNICEF supported infant and young child feeding counselling and basic paediatric services at Blue Dots, reaching 1,496 caregivers of children under age two, and 750 children received measles, polio and other routine vaccines. In total, 40,433 children accessed formal and non-formal learning opportunities supported by UNICEF.

In Hungary, UNICEF signed agreements with four municipalities to reach almost 41,700 children and their families with services across all response sectors. UNICEF and partners helped create linkages to national child protection services within child and family support hubs and refugee accommodation centres across six locations. Over 800 children accessed education through UNICEF-supported programmes. UNICEF, in partnership with Viber, reached 12,000 people with messages on services, caregivers' guidance - including protecting children from sexual abuse and trafficking, education, and available helplines.

2.3 Cross-cutting

Strategic Planning
ECARO supported Country Offices in strategic planning and prioritisation. In September 2022, UNICEF's Executive Board approved seven Country Programme Documents (CPDs). In November 2022, a workshop was organised for programme practitioners from these Country Offices to facilitate the operationalisation of the programmes, identify common key interventions and successful implementation strategies to help prepare workplans, ensure that results are reflected, and simplification measures are integrated into the setting up of the programmes.

Knowledge management (KM), data and research and evaluation
Country Offices received sustained technical support to roll out UNICEF's global KM Strategy. Country Offices in Türkiye and Kazakhstan developed country-specific KM Implementation Plans, including activities for all nine KM Global Priorities. Both examples are featured as best practices globally.

The team finalised nine regional evaluation products related to COVID-19, as well as country programme evaluations, ROMP evaluations on deinstitutionalisation and project-specific donor-driven evaluations. Much of 2022 was devoted to evaluating UNICEF's refugee response to the Ukraine crisis. The team supported Country Offices in planning, implementing, and providing quality assure to all evaluation-related activities, as well as provided direct business continuity support as needed.

Partnerships and engagement
UNICEF was able to engage purposefully with public and private donors, including key National Committees, to mobilise quality resources for humanitarian response and development programming and leverage results for children across the region
·   ECAR in 2022 has signed 11 agreements with EU institutions in the amount of EUR 90.5 million.

·	The Regional Office has been strategically supporting the COs and the Governments in the region, the EU Members States for utilizing their EU funding received through the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF)

The RO has been steadily expanding its partnerships with IFIs across the region, positioning UNICEF as partner of choice for the children and adolescents and providing ongoing support and guidance to the COs for purposeful partnerships building. Thanks to the close collaboration with various headquarter teams and the timely contributions from public and private sector donors, UNICEF received US$1.3 billion to meet the needs of millions of children and their families affected by the war in Ukraine.

Social and behavioural change (SBC)

ECARO provided technical assistance to Country Offices in strengthening the quality and scale of SBC interventions in the region, as well as to mainstream and institutionalise SBC in CPDs, public health emergencies and humanitarian response. The key interconnected blocks for SBC institutionalisation are: (a) building the capacity of the SBC UNICEF network, local partners, and government; (b) delivery and implementation of behaviourally informed interventions through groundwork for the institutionalisation of behavioural interventions within UNICEF and government-led sectors; (c) tactical coalitions and alliances to advance SBC with academia, faith-based organisations and CSOs; and (d) inter-agency cooperation and coordination.

Young people

Adolescents and youth were among the groups most affected by the recent European crises, including COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. ECARO strengthened its youth participation and development programming by bringing youth voices on inclusiveness, school-to-work transitions, digitalisation and climate to the forefront, as well as supported Country Offices in increasing youth access to relevant and gender-sensitive information and services, building their skills and resilience, and supporting digitalisation and innovation initiatives. This resulted in a growing demand for youth activation, meaningful participation, data, improved policies, and increased attention by governments, European institutions, and UN partners to youth issues.

In the context of the Regional Flagship of building "connectedness" among young people, the focus was strengthening the capacity of Country Offices to engage youth using digital platforms and social media, as well as supporting youth advisory groups, student councils, municipal youth councils. Romania and Moldova's work on strengthening connectedness through modalities of offline youth engagement and participation in educational settings was documented, and results will be shared with other country offices for adaptation and replication.

Technology for development

In 2022 ECARO provided oversight, technical support and guidance for technology for development and capacity building by leveraging UNICEF's core and innovative digital solutions for programmes leading to the co-creation of a number of new platforms to expand learning, parenting, data and analysis.

Public advocacy and communication

In 2022, ECARO's digital and social media channels saw 47 million impressions (74% more than in 2021) and 25 million users reached (30% more than in 2021). Four million people engaged with UNICEF on social media, doubling the engagement rate of 2021. And 105,441 new followers joined our accounts in 2022, increasing our fan base by 24% compared to 2021.

2.4 Internal management

ECARO scaled up operations to respond to the Ukraine emergency, maintaining an efficient and agile office, strong governance mechanisms, and fostering internal and external partnerships. Active partnerships and cash transfers in ECARO increased by 100 per cent and 1,000 per cent, respectively. Eighty partnership agreements were finalized with a transfer of over US$36 million. Despite the increase in partnerships and minimum requirements, the Regional Office fully met its Key

Performance Indicator (KPI) on partnership management. In addition, the region had its strongest performance on the monitoring and assurance requirements, with all offices but two fully meeting the requirements.

In 2022, ECARO human resources achieved all expected results and additionally led the human resource component of the Ukraine emergency response and outflow of refugee countries. During the year, partnerships were maximised and these continued to provide strategic support for efficient selection processes, performance management best practices, and organisational design. The ECAR also remained the leading region in terms of recruitment KPIs.

[1] Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania and Slovakia
[2] Poland, Moldova, Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia and Belarus

Lessons Learned and Innovations

In 2022, ECARO learned that as a region, it had the capacity to respond to an L3 emergency. One of its biggest strengths is the national staff, who were able to deploy quickly and understood the operating environment and were able to work through national structures to help scale the response.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis highlighted the central role of governments and the importance of cooperating with them closely in high- and middle-income countries to provide vital support in addressing the crisis. Close coordination is required with a diversified pool of partners (including governments at national and decentralised levels, United Nations agencies, private businesses, civil society, Gavi, the Global Fund, and international financial institutions) to leverage their strengths and produce synergies. Better networked ways of working are required, involving development institutions, private companies, local communities, and new philanthropists – with skills, scale, access and sustainable business models (that UNICEF might not have in place).

Specifically, cooperation with UNHCR has been critical for advancing the advocacy agenda for protecting children, families and women. The joint engagement has been well recognised by key national counterparts and the efforts to strengthen collaboration and synergies in the field.

The escalation of the war in Ukraine highlighted the fragility of national child protection systems across the region, including in EU member states. The emergency response in Ukraine and neighbouring countries (including EU member states) has shown the importance of expanding and strengthening child protection systems to support various vulnerable groups that have struggled to cope with the sudden inflow of children in need of care and protection.

The Ukraine crisis again highlighted a gap in reliable data that can be quickly used and accessed. ECARO also learned that cross-border dimensions of the child protection agenda in the region continue to be significant and where UNICEF can add value. This includes the context of population movements related to the war in Ukraine, irregular migration flows, and the evacuation or transfer of children – whether from Iraq and Syria back to the region or the evacuations from Afghanistan - where UNICEF was asked to support UASC.

The development of multiple products related to Ukraine and the refugee response was enabled by the regular sharing of information, development of templates, and orientation from the Emergency Situation Centre and humanitarian performance monitoring team to countries on reporting using intranet sites. It was also clear that the standard indicators for humanitarian response needed to be adjusted to be more attuned to working through national systems.
Countries must assess the barriers and drivers influencing vaccine uptake to develop targeted

interventions that can increase vaccination uptake. The resulting insights should inform the development of localised solutions designed with the participation of relevant stakeholders, including policymakers, health workers and caregivers. Additionally, to ensure their sustainability, assessments and solutions should be budgeted as part of the National Immunization Strategies.

A lack of mechanisms to collect data on marginalised children, including Ukrainian refugee children and their educational situation, poses a challenge to reach out to these children, identify their needs, and design equity-focused programmes. ECARO will continue to advocate for the need to address data and information gaps with governments in the region and other partners.

ECARO launched a multi-country evaluation of deinstitutionalisation and childcare reform, which provides a unique opportunity for the region to capitalise on learning and experience and influence that will further support countries in the region to advance the deinstitutionalisation agenda. The range of papers (around the continuum of services) developed by ECARO will also encourage policy and practice development in countries.

Relevant and sustainable mechanisms for youth engagement and consultations continued to be required. The recent and ongoing crises in the region have disproportionately impacted youth, who need to be systematically engaged in issues affecting their lives through recognising them as leaders, influencers, motivators, peer educators and young experts. Both governments and multilateral partners recognise the power of engaging with youth to foster cross-country connections and inter-generational relationships to contribute towards more cohesive communities, countries and a region. This provides UNICEF with critical opportunities to strengthen its focus on youth programming and align the commitment to engage, connect and empower young people with crucial EU agendas.

The selection of UNICEF to pilot the European Child Guarantee (ECG) in seven EU countries and the subsequent adoption of the Council Recommendation has created additional opportunities to advance the rights and protection of children. The ECG is an ambitious initiative that seeks to ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty and social exclusion has access to the essential services and support they need to thrive – a significant step towards realising the vision of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The ECG has been presented to governments outside the EU in the ECA Region and is being promoted as an approach to countries in the European Neighbourhood.

Efforts have been made to improve workplace culture. In 2022, the ECAR staff counsellor successfully piloted the development of Country Office Wellbeing Strategies in two countries (Uzbekistan and Türkiye) with the aim of embedding staff well-being in the country office framework.

Three digital tools were developed, resulting in efficiency gains for the Regional Operations teamwork and the clients the team serves and supports. The ECARO Procurement Workflow & Dashboard and budget monitoring reports have been successfully launched. At the same time, the last tool, the PBR chatbot, is finalised and waiting for final ICTD clearance for publishing. Once launched, the solution will be considered for other critical topics in the ECARO and the region (i.e., IP management, security, travel, etc.).

Country Office teams have highly appreciated the coordinated approach to CPD planning. As part of the CPD development process, the regional approach to developing programme rationales informed global guidelines.