

# Foreword from UNICEF

If all children are to reach their full potential in life, all children must have an equal chance of receiving a good quality education. The critical importance of education for the prospects and prosperity of individuals, communities and entire nations has been recognised in the global Education 2030 Agenda under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with SDG 4 demanding inclusive and equitable quality education for all. That goal cannot be met, however, without addressing uneven progress on education. Too often, the most marginalised children are left behind, including girls, ethnic and linguistic minorities, immigrants and refugees, children with disabilities, and those from low-income families or living in remote areas.

If these children are to be fully included in education, we need to understand the factors that inhibit their schooling and exclude them from learning. This new study on the Western Balkan countries aims to fill key knowledge gaps on this issue, carried out jointly by UNICEF, the European Commission (EC) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

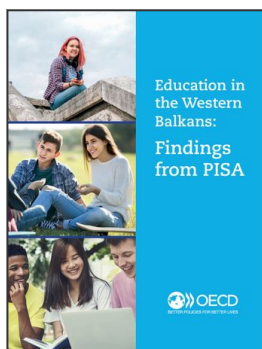
The study is a contribution to the strenuous efforts being made by these countries to introduce reforms that will improve access to quality education and life-long learning, reflecting their firm commitment to the Education 2030 Agenda. It sets out the current education environment and challenges in the Western Balkans to inform data-driven policy and planning that can address the unmet learning needs of children.

Effective policy and practice are illuminated by a knowledge base that is rooted in an in-depth analysis of education systems and the barriers that children face to full inclusion. Drawing on the large-scale data collected by PISA 2018 surveys, the study reveals the underlying challenges in promoting learning and skills development for every child. The analysis also draws on the experiences of children themselves, examining the demographic characteristics of children and their families to provide insights into who is at risk of missing out on education and the need for targeted interventions. A comparative analysis of school systems and teaching practices helps to identify areas that must be addressed to strengthen the capacity of education systems to meet the learning needs of all children. The study could not be more timely, as it sheds light on the preparedness of schools to organise digital learning before the surge in online learning triggered by the COVID-19 crisis.

The study builds on UNICEF's decades of experience in the Western Balkans, working to protect the rights of every child, including their rights to go to school and learn regardless of who they are or where they live. Our goal: to achieve the vision of an inclusive quality education for every child, with equity and learning at its core.

We hope that this study will serve as an evidence base to inform the policies and programmes that are needed to build inclusive and equitable education systems that provide all children with quality learning. UNICEF will continue to listen to the voices of children and work with government, development partners, civil society organisations and the private sector to improve education outcomes for all children; but particularly those who are the most vulnerable.

Afshan Khan  
UNICEF Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia  
Special Co-ordinator for Refugee and Migrant Response in Europe



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