



DEC
2020



HIGHLIGHTS

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EDITORIAL by the UN Resident Coordinator

In December 2019 we were preparing for a busy year ahead. UN agencies in North Macedonia were refining their ambitious plans for 2020, including our 2021-2025 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (SDCF), a key UN strategic planning document for the country. Little did we know how different the year ahead would be.

It is not an overstatement that the impact of COVID-19 has completely changed our lives. It has taken time to adjust to the new reality, professionally and personally. Some changes may last, others may be reversed, but one thing is certain: the impact on our societies will be lasting. Lack of predictability has been a key characteristic of 2020. With it came uncertainty and fear that made many situations, expected or unexpected, more challenging. As we enter 2021 challenges remain, but we have adapted, at home and at work. Moreover, the transition to 2021 has been marked by hope, which we need to balance by caution. It is timely to pause and remind ourselves of considerations for 2021 and beyond:

We must not get too relaxed and forget about the importance of COVID-19 protection. Wearing a mask, washing hands and keeping physical distance should remain our guiding principles in the months to come. Significant progress has been made towards the COVID-19 vaccine, but months will pass before the vaccination rate is high enough to protect the broader population. This is a reality check that needs to be shared with our neighbours, friends and families.

While COVID-19 vaccines will boost our health protection, our societies will need years to recover from the pandemic's socio-economic impact and shocks. Recovery will be prolonged and challenging. It will require persistence and patience, coupled with focus on positive change – in our personal lives and at our work.

We need to act individually and for the collective good, with sustainable development and better

recovery for current and future generations. We need to continue recognizing that some may be more vulnerable than others and that they require our enhanced efforts and attention in order not to be left behind. This is not only the responsibility of decision-makers, but of all individuals in our societies. Every action can make a difference!



For most, but particularly for health workers and other first responders to COVID-19, end of 2020 is marked by exhaustion after a prolonged year of restrictions, measures and response. We are all anxious to return to the pre-COVID-19 normal.

But we must not shy away from reflecting on and recognizing the achievements of 2020, how we experienced and overcame challenges and hurdles. This is an opportunity to acknowledge – with pride! – our strengths, resilience and ability to persevere, as individuals, families, communities and societies.

With that in mind I wish you all the best for 2021. May it be healthy, abundant with joy and personal fulfilment. As we embark on the first year of SDCF and the second year of the Decade of Action towards Sustainable Development Goals – our shared vision to end poverty, rescue the planet and build a peaceful world – may 2021 be characterized by the enhanced individual and collective efforts to continue ensuring sustainable development and better opportunities for all in North Macedonia – regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status, religion, belief, ethnicity, disability or any other ground or difference!

Rossana Dudziak
UN Resident Coordinator in North Macedonia

KEY DATES

DECEMBER

- 3** Online discussion on the inclusion of women with disabilities in politics and defence under the 16 Days of Activism campaign organized by UN Women, in collaboration with NGO Polio Plus, to mark the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.
- 3** UNDP supported the official opening of the first country work-oriented rehabilitation center, run by NGO Izgrev, in Strumica.
- 10** UN Women organized an online debate on gender equality and inclusion of women with disabilities in defense sector.
- 14** WHO organized an event “COVID-19-related health and socio-economic impact and mitigation in North Macedonia”
- 21-22** Strategic planning workshop organized by UN Women for line-ministries on mainstreaming gender in planning processes.
- 22** UN in North Macedonia and Finance Think organized a conference “Socio-Economic Impact of COVID 19 in North Macedonia – lessons learned and way forward for effective and sustainable recovery”

COVID-19 RESPONSE & RECOVERY

Conference on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in the country

UN in North Macedonia, in partnership with Finance Think think-thank, organized a hybrid event “Socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in North Macedonia – lessons learned and way forward for effective and sustainable recovery” on 22 December. The conference brought together the Government, international partners and other stakeholders, with an aim to discuss efforts in response to COVID-19 and to elaborate on the future recovery efforts to build back better.

Two conference panels, which included high-level speakers from the Government, UN and the World Bank, and the European Union (EU), focused on **people and economy**, following the **Covid-19 Response Framework (CRF)** logic. Speakers agreed with the opening reflections that the crisis exposed the existing systemic weaknesses and hit the most vulnerable groups the hardest; but also that it presents an opportunity for economic restructuring that needs to be backed by structural reforms.

Key outtakes of the event include:

- (1) Building human capital is the key precondition for sustainable development in North Macedonia.** This requires a coordinated, sustained and long-term effort to improve the quality of education at all levels, from infrastructure to curriculum and streamlined values. Students' learning path requires adjustments that include critical thinking, enhancement of their individual potential and use of digital tools. To facilitate this, IT skills of teachers need to be advanced, and access to equipment, learning and psychosocial support for disadvantaged students needs to be secured. Teachers should be given more individual discretion and responsibility to design classes, to be better able to develop values and emotional intelligence of students. In the context of crisis, education needs to be the most resilient: the schools should be the last to close and the first to reopen when it is safe to do so, with timely measures in place to mitigate for learning losses.
- (2) Health is a prerequisite for sustainable development and a strong economic multiplier.** In the coming period the focus should be put on building public trust through community engagement, as well as on improving institutional, financial and human resources for basic service provision at local level. Strengthening routine health and vulnerability monitoring, including a system for mental support, as well as enhancing technology and innovation to make e-health more accessible will be key for sustaining gains towards universal health and social protection.
- (3) Sustainable recovery calls for coordinated policy response towards 'just transition'**



A photo from the opening of the 22 December hybrid conference on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in the country, organized jointly by UN in North Macedonia and Finance Think

that integrates green and innovative sources to post-pandemic growth, while building system resilience and ensuring inclusiveness, with special focus on women. To overcome the disproportionately stronger crisis impact on women and to transform gender disparities into an accelerator of growth, the Government needs to commit to and enhance skills for gender-responsive budgeting, invest in care economy and enhance efforts to raise public awareness that challenges the deeply rooted prejudice against women.

(4) Basic services for provision of protection and psychosocial support must remain available, affordable and accessible at all times. There is a space to embed systematic responsiveness of social protection instruments to future crises and to support social workers to provide innovative social services while reducing their administrative duties. A multi-sectorial, integrated data-based response, clear protocol and capacity to provide services is key to effectively address gender-based violence.

(5) To build more resilient and sustainable local food systems, the country should diversify food supplies and food sources, reinforce local food production where possible, and access markets to ensure sales of locally produced food.

(6) The country needs to rebuild fiscal buffers by strengthening tax administration, reducing tax expenditures and adjusting tax policy in areas like environmental and digital taxation. This should be combined with gradual scaling back of crisis-related stimulus spending, addressing longer-term sustainability of the pension and health systems, strengthening public investment management, and reviewing support to corporate sector through multiple and sometimes overlapping state aid programs. Rationalizing public service and pay,

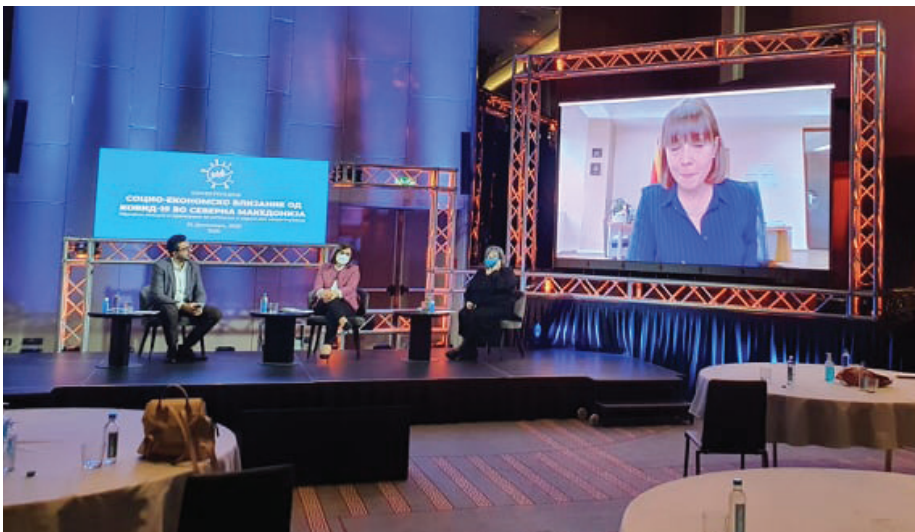
and diversifying sources of financing will be key to success.

(7) Fiscal consolidation must not restrict economic growth. North Macedonia needs to prioritize structural reforms to boost productivity through productive and innovative processes in the business sector, which needs to adjust to the new economic realities, while the Government needs to facilitate this through smart regulation and effective state aid and competition policy. Focus on SmartER and inclusive growth and plan for public investments should enhance the competitiveness of the private sector and its integration into the global value chains, through innovation and technological upgrade and by boosting human capital. With the accelerated push for these reforms, North Macedonia could reach the EU living standard average in 30 years, but only half of that time would be needed to reach peers like Bulgaria and Croatia.

(8) Focusing only on unemployment rate could lead to wrong policy choices, as many of the newly unemployed people, especially women, go directly into inactivity, which is much more difficult and expensive to revert. To prevent jobless recovery, it is important for policy response to be comprehensive. It needs to focus on the supply side and the activation measures, as well as on the demand side, by understanding how different sectors create jobs and how this can be boosted through innovation. For more effective activation, the Youth Guarantee should be supported by second chance programmes aimed at refreshing workers' skills according to the needs of the market.

(9) The country needs to open dialogue on the quality of essential jobs, having in mind that essential workers – such as farmers and first respondents – are predominantly earning

COVID-19 RESPONSE & RECOVERY *(continued)*



Mila Carovska, Minister of Education and Science, speaking at the 22 December conference on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in North Macedonia

a low pay. The organization aspects, e.g. who can transit to telework and who will take care of children, are also important to address. The Labour Law currently under development should streamline aspects exposed by the pandemic to build resilience for potential future shocks.

(10) Public policies need to be developed in meaningful consultation with key stakeholders in order to respond to the real needs and to maintain transparency. Policies should be effectively monitored and tested against collected evidence and data, adjusted against changing context and to ensure accountability of institutions. For example, the impact of the increased financial support for activation (quadrupled in 2020) should be tested through data-based cost benefit analysis.

At the end, [nine CRF-based measures](#) were presented, aimed at curbing the spread of the virus and strengthening health services; improving the quality of education during the pandemic; and saving income fallouts and supporting jobs. The study, financed by the British Embassy in Skopje, was developed by a team of national experts under Finance Think and **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** technical leadership on behalf of the **UN Resident Coordinator's Office (RCO)** and in cooperation with four other UN entities: **International Labour Organization (ILO)**, **UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)**, **UN Women** and the **World Health Organization (WHO)**.

Other COVID-19 response activities

UN entities continue to support COVID-19 response in the country with specific and detailed analysis focused on issues within their respective field of expertise.

ILO equipped the Organization of Employers of Macedonia and the Business Confederation of

Macedonia with the [Prevention and mitigation of COVID-19 at work for SMEs - ACTION CHECKLIST](#) to assess COVID-19 risks in the workplace, including information for preventive safety and health measures that can be used in any potential future outbreaks. On their behalf, ILO also conducted the second round of enterprise survey, to understand the views of the businesses about the effectiveness of the three and the potential of the fourth package of Government COVID19 response measures. The findings of the previous survey and the associated [report](#) was used by the employers' organizations to advocate and influence some of the active measures and decrees.

The Federation of Trade Unions of Macedonia and their branch unions reorganized their work in accordance with the recommendations of the Government and ILO. Since the beginning of the crisis, the union provided free legal aid to workers in several companies, [with more than 80,000 workers benefitting from enhanced focus on services](#). Labour Standards provide useful guidance for ensuring decent work, including in the context of this crisis. [The compilation](#) answers most frequently asked questions related to international labour standards and COVID-19 and aims at supporting the Government, employers and workers' adjustment and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consultations by the relevant authorities with workers' representatives alongside those of business are needed for any work-related policy issue, and never more so than today. This [brief](#) provides examples of how social dialogue has been used to manage the return to work in a safe manner at various levels and different regions, illustrating how effective dialogue delivers contextualised solutions and builds trust and confidence in the measures. In addition, [ILO policy brief](#) demonstrates how effective tripartite social dialogue and cooperation among the Government, employers' and workers' organizations can be drivers for economic and social resilience, competitiveness, stability and inclusive growth and development.

The **United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)** produced a video on volunteering and COVID-19 for social media along with educational posters and flyers on protective measures for older persons. With the financial support of the British Embassy Skopje and in cooperation with the Ministries of Labour and Social Policy, Health, Interior and CSOs, UNFPA finalized Protocols for the safe operation of shelter centres in times of COVID-19, as well as for the sexual assault referral centres for victims of sexual violence. This is part of the multi-sectoral response to gender-based violence during COVID-19, that also includes around 14,000 posters and leaflets on reporting gender-based violence to be distributed.

On International Anti-Corruption Day, the **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)** presented risks and mitigating measures amid the upcoming distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, highlighting the need for governments, the private sector and civil society to adopt and apply more robust systems for accountability, transparency and integrity without delay. The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), of which UNODC is the custodian, provides a solid global framework for these efforts.

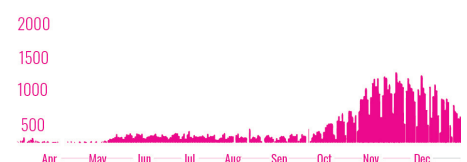
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) distributed disinfection and sanitary items (dispensers and disinfections liquids, bed linens) to support government capacities in COVID-19 response. All items are delivered as part of the project "Identifying and Addressing COVID-19 challenges within the Migrant and Refugee Response in the Western Balkans", funded by the EU Service for Foreign Policy Instruments.

In cooperation with the WHO Venice Office for Investment for Health and Development, **WHO North Macedonia** organised a workshop on 14 December 2020 to discuss the preliminary findings of the assessment of COVID-19-related health and socio-economic impact and mitigation in North Macedonia bringing together more than 60 participants from across the Government, international partners and civil society.

LATEST EPIDEMIOLOGICAL DATA (29 Dec 2020)

81,804 CONFIRMED COVID-19 CASES	2,456 COVID-19-RELATED FATALITIES
39,265 CONFIRMED CASES PER 1,000,000 PEOPLE	1,178 FATALITIES PER 1,000,000 PEOPLE

Daily new cases reported



For latest data see covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/mk

OTHER ACTIVITIES

UNHCR and the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors organized the Annual Roundtable on Law and Practice in Refugee Protection on 21 December, dedicated to assessing courts' handling of asylum cases in the country, with the participation of the Ministry of Interior – Border Police and Sector for Asylum, the Ombudsman, NGOs and attorneys providing legal aid to asylum-seekers and refugees. The focus of the event was holding public hearings for asylum-seekers before courts and conducting online interviews for refugee status determination. UNHCR also delivered the necessary items to the reception centre for asylum seekers Vizbegovo to support the establishment of a safe counselling room for confidential and effective communication between the asylum-seekers and the legal aid partner, as well as with the centre's management.

On the occasion of the International Day of Human Rights (10 December) and the closure of the 16 Days of Activism campaign, **UN Women** and NGO Polio Plus hosted an online debate on gender equality and inclusion of women with disabilities in the defence sector, with guest speakers from the Cabinet of the President and the Ministry of Defence. In coordination with the Parliamentary Institute, UN Women organized a series of workshops to mainstream gender in the oversight role of the Parliament and inform the Members of Parliament and Parliamentary Institute about the tools of applying gender-responsive budgeting in the review and oversight of the proposed legislation, policies and budgets. UN Women also held two online trainings in cooperation with the National Council for Gender Equality and its partner AGORA, for grass-root CSOs to improve understanding and practical skills for increasing women's participation in the local planning and budgeting processes.

UNDP continued with activities for the completion of primary education for vulnerable groups with juveniles in new facility in village of Volkovija, among Roma population in Municipality of Kumanovo and in three prisons for inmates with no formal primary education. UNDP also participated in the signing of the sub-regional project (Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia) for strengthened national and local systems to support the effective socio-economic integration of returnees in the Western Balkans. Funds will be used for implementing local-level programmes and translating tested innovative solutions into policy recommendations and integration into national regulation and Government-funded programmes.

UNDP supported the opening of the first country work-oriented rehabilitation centre by NGO Izgrev in Strumica, which is part of a holistic approach designed jointly with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy to pilot the professional rehabilitation processes and provide evidence-based recommendations for policy changes. The centre will support learning new skills for more effective labour market activation, especially for people with disabilities.

IN FOCUS Preparing for COVID-19 vaccine



Vaccine preparation. Photo credit @UNICEF/2020/Georgiev

Getting ready for COVID-19 vaccine

No matter where we live, COVID-19 pandemic affects everyone of us. However, with more news about promising vaccines, and as we begin to imagine a day when COVID-19 is behind us, our guiding principle must be that the light at the end of the tunnel needs to shine for all, including all the residents of North Macedonia. No one will be safe, until everyone is safe.

North Macedonia is working on its COVID-19 Vaccination Readiness Plan to ensure vaccines reach as many vulnerable people as possible fast, starting with health care workers, frontline essential staff and older people. The country has been exploring different options to secure vaccines and has to-date signed up to the [COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility \(COVAX Facility\)](#) among 172 other countries to benefit from this vaccine allocation system. Vaccines through COVAX are expected in the beginning of March 2021 to cover front line workers and vulnerable populations or roughly 20% of the population by end-2021. The Government is working towards securing additional vaccines directly from producers and through direct assistance from its international partners.

The [COVAX Facility](#), led by [Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance](#), [WHO](#) and the [Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations \(CEPI\)](#), is open to all countries. The main aim is to ensure that people in all corners of the world will get access to COVID-19 vaccines once they are available, regardless of their wealth. COVAX is a recognized mechanism to make sure that, as vaccines become available, no country is pushed to the back of the line. Vaccines are life-saving tools and will only be effective if they are available for the most vulnerable equitably and simultaneously in all countries.

UNICEF joined the Advance Market Commitment of the COVAX Facility to make sure that low- and lower-middle income countries get COVID-19 vaccines. As the largest vaccine buyer in the world, [procuring more than 2 billion doses](#) annually for routine immunization and outbreak response on behalf of nearly 100 countries, UNICEF is [coordinating and supporting](#) the procurement and [international freight](#) of COVID-19 vaccines for the COVAX Facility. North Macedonia will be using this mechanism.

As the designated COVAX procurement coordinator and procurement agent, UNICEF has launched the [COVID-19 Vaccine Market Dashboard](#), an interactive tool for countries, partners and industry to follow the developments of the rapidly evolving COVID-19 vaccine market and the efforts of COVAX Facility to ensure fair and equitable access for all countries. UNICEF will only procure and supply COVID-19 vaccines that meet WHO's established safety and efficacy criteria and have received regulatory approval.

Deploying the vaccine

Securing the vaccines is, however, only part of the story. Diligent work is done to assess and prepare all systems and workforce, as well as legislative and communications aspects required to deploy the vaccine. This work is led by the National Technical Working Group for COVID-19 Vaccination and builds on [WHO and UNICEF Guidance on National Deployment and Vaccination Planning](#) to help countries develop plans for COVID-19 vaccine introduction.

The assessment of the vaccine deployment needs has reviewed and put in place decision-making structures for planning and coordination. Regulatory framework has been put in place to ensure the country can find pathways to expediate vaccine registration and procurement; and the country is looking at its supply and cold chains management, training health workers and digitalized system of individual vaccination records for better monitoring and catch up.

While COVID-19 vaccination means the light at the end of the tunnel for North Macedonia, the existence of a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine alone will not end the pandemic. We all have a part to play to help slow the spread of COVID-19, including making sure we follow protocols for testing and treatment, as well as to continue to wash hands, practice physical distancing and wear a mask.

The latest version of the Sustainable Development Bulletin is available on UN North Macedonia website. For additional information, please contact rc-northmacedonia@un.org. Produced by the UN Resident Coordinator's Office in North Macedonia | 31 December 2020.

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