

# CHILD PROTECTION CASE STUDY COVID-19

Lessons Learned from Georgia

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for every child



Lile and her mother, Mika in their art therapy session on the poster for the TV programme "Parent's Hour" that was aired at the Georgian Public Broadcaster. The TV programme was supported by UNICEF.

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## PROTECTING THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN DURING AND BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the relatively low COVID-19 prevalence and mortality rates in Georgia during the spring and summer of 2020, the country has been hit hard by the pandemic. The complex socio-economic impact of COVID-19 is causing huge ramifications for social welfare and child protection as many households slip, or descend even further, into poverty.

UNICEF Georgia responded quickly to avert the pandemic's negative implications for the most vulnerable children. After the emergency began in March 2020, UNICEF conducted a rapid needs assessment to identify the most vulnerable groups of children in Georgia, and the issues facing them. The most vulnerable groups were found to be children with disabilities, children living in alternative care and children in the justice system. The assessment also highlighted the increased risk of violence against children during the pandemic and the critical role of the social service workforce during emergencies.

This case study will focus on UNICEF's efforts to protect two

of the most vulnerable groups of children during the COVID-19 emergency – those with disabilities and those in alternative care – and the activities carried out to transition the child protection system (social workers, case management and the provision of services) to meet the needs of these children. To protect the children most at risk, a two-fold intervention was used, to strengthen the child protection system and to provide direct interventions to the most vulnerable children and their families. For children with disabilities, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs)<sup>1</sup> in the remote provision of services and transformation of services; UNICEF also launched a specialized television programme and Facebook page to support parents of children with disabilities during the COVID-19 emergency. Mental health psychosocial support was provided to children in alternative care and their caregivers, for the first time. Working with local partners, UNICEF developed COVID-19-related guidelines and improved supervision for social workers from the child protection system.

**UNICEF Georgia learned valuable lessons while working to protect the most vulnerable children during the COVID-19 emergency.**

<sup>1</sup> In this case study, the name of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs will be mentioned as Ministry of Health and Social Affairs



Andria and his mother, Nino. Nino participated in the UNICEF supported project which aimed at supporting parents of children with disabilities affected by COVID-19.

## CONTEXT

Georgia’s response to COVID-19 has kept prevalence and mortality rates amongst the lowest worldwide through to the summer of 2020: as of 25 August 2020, there were 1,429 cases and 19 fatalities recorded for a population of 3.7 million. However, the success of the measures taken to limit the impact of the pandemic come at a high socio-economic price: High rates of poverty (19.5 per cent of the population lived in absolute poverty in 2019), the country’s dependence on tourism and remittances and a large informal labour market, when coupled with the restrictions to limit the spread of COVID-19, led many households to fall, or go further, into poverty.

UNICEF Georgia learned valuable lessons while working to protect the most vulnerable children during the COVID-19 emergency. The benefits of teleservices was realized through successful implementation, and the transition to remote service provision highlighted the importance of professional supervision of social workers and continuous support as cornerstones for high-quality services. The adaptations that were made in response to COVID-19 also benefited other children as the system was strengthened: these adaptations will form the basis for further developing the child protection system in Georgia.

The successful transition to remote service provision using teleservices prompted the Government of Georgia to explore the possibility of establishing a hybrid model of service provision for children with disabilities, that can be used whenever circumstances require. The hybrid model provides more flexibility for service provision by adapting existing services to provide two different modes of interaction with beneficiaries: in cases of emergencies or restricted access, services will be delivered virtually; but in other cases, service providers will resume face-to-face interaction with beneficiaries (children and their caregivers).

<b>Start date</b>	1 April 2020
<b>End date</b>	on-going
<b>Location</b>	Georgia
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The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into focus many deep-rooted problems and has highlighted the importance of tackling issues facing the most vulnerable children and their families. Even though this pandemic is primarily a health issue, it has proved to have huge ramifications for social welfare and child protection, which also makes it a welfare issue with huge ramifications for public health.

UNICEF conducted a rapid needs assessment in March 2020 to identify the most vulnerable groups of children and to assess the measures being carried out by the Government (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and Ministry of Justice), non-government organizations and service providers for children and families. As the COVID-19 situation in Georgia quickly transformed into an emergency – with a State of Emergency declared on 21 March 2020 – consequential limitations on movement and lockdown of schools and social services, led UNICEF to focus resources on meeting the increasing needs of the most vulnerable children.

Issues faced by the vulnerable groups of children identified in the rapid needs assessment:

- **Children with disabilities:** COVID-19 has created unique challenges for children with disabilities and their families. In the period March–May 2020, social services for children with disabilities have been either closed or have transitioned to remote provision of support. In addition to parents’ concerns regarding their children’s elevated risk of infection, loss of family income and reduced access to food, medical and hygiene supplies, they were suddenly facing responsibility for their child’s often complex physical, academic and psychological needs. As some of the restrictions have been lifted, in June 2020 the services resumed face-to-face service

delivery for children with disabilities. UNICEF continued to assist parents and service providers in transitioning back to traditional models of service while complying with the new health and safety regulations. Furthermore, as the COVID situation remains volatile and Georgia has an increasing number of COVID-19 cases, partial or full transition to remote service provision is still under discussion.

- **Children in alternative care:** COVID-19 has increased the risks for children living in small group homes, foster care, and specialized institutions of being exposed to violence, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. The lockdown and movement restrictions during March–May 2020 limited opportunities for children to contact their families and interact with friends and the outside world. The travel restrictions were lifted in June 2020, but children remained at high risk due to the impact of insecurity and economic hardships on caregivers and service providers.
- **Social workers:** These staff are essential, especially during emergencies, when they work with children and their families within the social welfare sector. During the period March–May 2020, social workers were required to work remotely except in emergency cases. The majority of social services were also closed, although shelters for street children maintained essential functions, day care centres for children with disabilities provided food and remote consultations, and shelters for victims of domestic violence also continued to function. As of June 2020, social workers returned to work face-to-face, but there remains a need for establishing and strengthening guidelines and for improving the skills of the social workforce during emergencies.

## APPROACH

A two-fold intervention process was launched to protect the most vulnerable children:

- Strengthening the child protection system through the introduction of a remote or hybrid mode of operation;
- Direct interventions to the most vulnerable children and their families.

Key activities included:

### Children with disabilities

- UNICEF provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs for the remote provision and



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transformation of services for children with disabilities. UNICEF's partner, McLain Association for Georgia, provided direct technical assistance to service providers, which entailed guidance for 400 frontline child protection staff working with children with disabilities to transition to remote service delivery. This approach tackled services such as early intervention, day care centres for children with disabilities, home care, and habilitation-rehabilitation service. With UNICEF technical assistance, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs adopted an ordinance for teleservice provision and transformation of services for children with disabilities. UNICEF continues to support the Ministry by developing guidelines for remote service provision.

- UNICEF launched a specialized television (TV) programme for parents of children with disabilities, in partnership with the Georgian Public Broadcasting, Agency for State Care and Assistance for the Victims of Human Trafficking, and McLain Association for Georgia. Twice a week, during April and May 2020, top field experts discussed various topics facing children living with disabilities and their families during the COVID-19 emergency, including independent living skills, behaviour management strategies, teaching and learning strategies, and parental self-care. The programme – that was translated into sign language and minority languages – was broadcast on the main education channel through eight 15-minute episodes. This was a first attempt to mainstream the issues of disability using TV.
- A Facebook page was launched to support parents of children with disabilities through the provision of information on COVID-19-related prevention and care, as well as relevant guidance. The emphasis was placed on education resources regarding COVID-19-related prevention and care, as well as relevant guidance on academic, emotional, and behavioural support. Most

of the materials were translated into sign language and minority languages to provide equity and inclusion of all children and families.

### Children in alternative care

- Mental health psychosocial support was provided to children in alternative care and their caregivers. The support covered the emotional state of caregivers, distress caused by COVID-19-related restrictions, the emotional state of children, anxiety caused by altered daily routine, conflict management, violence, and challenging behaviour. A team of psychologists delivered individual and group counselling and therapeutic sessions. This was the first time that children and their caregivers in alternative care were provided with such support. The work continues with additional training for state psychologists to ensure sustainability.

### Social workers:

- Working with local partners, UNICEF developed COVID-19-related guidelines and the provision of supervision for social workers from the child protection system. Highly-qualified social workers supported less experienced social workers in dealing with complex cases: they also provided thematic supervision and support.
- Guidelines on remote social work in emergencies have been developed for the State Care Agency, the Crime Prevention and Probation Agency and the Penitentiary Department. Online supervision meetings were conducted with 210 statutory social workers from the child protection and justice system. Some of the covered topics included: prevention of burn out, remote case management, and communication with beneficiaries. This work has been further developed with training provided to social workers from the child protection system on social work in emergencies, development of guidelines for online mediation and engagement with resource officers in the education system for training in the identification of violence against children.

## IMPACT

### Continuation of support to children with disabilities and their families

Support was provided to 400 frontline child protection staff during their adjustment to the remote working modality which enabled these essential workers to continue to provide much-needed services to children with disabilities and their

families during the pandemic. The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs adopted an ordinance for remote service provision that increased the system's flexibility and capability to reach out to the families in remote locations during the COVID-19 emergency. It allowed children with disabilities and their parents to receive counselling and therapeutic advice, and to continue critical rehabilitation and facilitation activities at home. The TV programme for parents of children with disabilities reached over 400,000 viewers across the country. The translation of the programme and the Facebook page into sign language and minority languages helped ensure that these mediums had the furthest reach. Importantly, the Facebook platform helped to minimize the distribution of misinformation by providing an authoritative and trustworthy source of disability-related information.

### Mental health psychosocial support for the first time in alternative care

Psychological support was provided to 247 children and 170 caregivers in foster care, small group homes and state institutions. This intervention had a positive impact on the quality of care, which did not suffer significantly during the lockdown period. No serious incidents were recorded during the lock down period. For many children and caregivers, this was the first time they had received qualified and long-term psychological assistance, which helped them to deal with past traumatic experiences, as well as supporting them through the increased challenges arising from the COVID-19 emergency. A number of children were referred to other more-appropriate services for their specific needs.

### Strengthened social work response in an emergency situation

The development of guidelines for remote work by social workers, COVID-19 guidelines and the provision of supervision contributed to the continued critical child protection functions for identification and support to vulnerable children during the emergency. This capacity also allowed the system to reach out to children and families in remote locations.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Remote service provision can be more than a last resort

The abrupt transition to remote service provision at the beginning of the emergency was met with doubt and scepticism by the social service workforce, non-government organizations and communities who perceived remote service provision as "forced" and "better than nothing." However, with the successful implementation of remote service provision, social service staff started to realize the advantages of teleservices, which include:

- **Convenience:** Children might feel more comfortable receiving therapies in an environment that feels safe and familiar to them. Additionally, parents can become more involved in the therapy and development of their children.
- **Better accessibility to services:** Teleservices make it possible to provide services to people living in remote areas and/or to the beneficiaries who cannot visit the service centre.
- **Children are attracted to technologies:** Most children are naturally curious and interested in using technology and this mode of communication can therefore provide extra motivation for them to receive therapy.
- **Teleservices enable social distancing:** The advantages of using teleservices to deliver services to children with disabilities and their families, and to children in alternative care enables the continued provision of services to vulnerable children without exposing them and the social service workforce to the risk of contracting COVID-19.

### Professional supervision and continuous support are the backbone of high-quality services

The transition to remote service provision in the midst of the emergency was no easy feat. The child protection services with the highest-quality of services during the COVID-19 emergency were well structured, and had the capacity to provide continuous supervision and support to social workers.

### Potential application

- The enhanced capacity of the child protection system, through established mechanisms for remote or hybrid service provision, will benefit children beyond COVID-19. For example, by improving access for children in remote locations.
- Platforms that support parents of children with disabilities also address issues of social norms and stigma around disability.
- The strengthening of state systems will build capacity for addressing other emergencies.

## NEXT STEPS

The advantages of remote service provision prompted the Government of Georgia to further explore the possibility of a mixed hybrid model of service provision, where services for children with disabilities would be provided online and offline.

As restrictions are gradually lifted, the next phase will focus on addressing the needs of children arising from the fallout of COVID-19 and the state of emergency, and addressing the capacity gaps of the Government. All programmes aim to have a gradual transition from humanitarian to development work and aim to strengthen existing institutions and professionals for sustainable results.

The focus of the next phase is to work with relevant partners to institutionalize the supervision of social workers and psychosocial support for children and caregivers in alternative care. Based on the COVID-19 related work and the lessons learned, together with local partners, UNICEF Georgia plans to:

- Conceptualize remote service provision for children with disabilities;
- Formulate the monitoring and support systems of hybrid models of service provision for children with disabilities. Provide a cost analysis of the proposed model;
- Train state psychologists to provide support to children in alternative care;
- Engage and enhance the capacity of local NGOs and community structures working on child rights, prevention of violence from the most vulnerable regions to support children with disabilities.
- Provide additional training for social workers on social work in emergencies;
- Provide personal protective equipment to social workers, the justice system and social services (including alternative care).

**UNICEF's Child Protection Section** works to protect children against all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse in development and humanitarian contexts. It does so by strengthening child protection systems and by promoting positive social practices to prevent and respond to violence, exploitation and abuse. Child protection promotes child well-being and allows for child survival, education, and socio-economic development.

**The Child Protection lessons learned series** aims to capture country knowledge and practices from UNICEF country offices regarding their experiences of responding to COVID-19, including a focus on recovery and linkages with longer-term programming as relevant. In addition, documentation of lessons learned enhances the wider humanitarian knowledge throughout regions and in global knowledge management initiatives.