

2. panel: aktualni izazovi očuvanja zdravlja djece

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It is my honour to accept Professor Grgurić's invitation to write a preamble for the journal *Paediatrica Croatica*. The invitation comes after completing my first year of service in UNICEF Croatia. The readership of this journal may be the best audience to understand the significance of the first year. So often, we have jointly advocated recognition of the importance of the first year in life!

Indeed, it has been a memorable year, especially the last months as we have all juggled with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquake that stroke the City of Zagreb on 22 March. It has also been a year of resilience and appreciation, especially for the kindness, professionalism and generosity that people from all walks of life have demonstrated at this difficult time, a testament to this beautiful country. I recognize that I am still at owe by the decisive and early actions taken by the Government to reduce the number of new COVID-19 cases and the number of deaths, the loyal adherence of so many health professionals to their long life oath to serve, despite the risks to their own lives, and the patience and discipline that so many people, especially children and young people have exercised by simply staying home to reduce the risk of infection during long self-isolation periods.

I am also deeply impressed by dedication that I have seen for children's rights from the Government, academia, civil society, business community, parents and children. This is a great base for even greater efforts to speed-up and scale-up the progress for children and young people, to learn from experience, multiply the positive examples and reach out to the most marginalized. To achieve that, we need knowledge and science to inform our decisions and build consensus for policies and programs that put children first as children are the present and the future of any society, which in the words of Nelson Mandela is always defined by the way it treats its children.

It has been a pleasure to read that the scientific community in this edition of *Paediatrica Croatica* pays such an undivided attention and commitment to the issues most relevant to children, most of them being at the heart of UNICEF's Programme in Croatia.

Our dear UNICEF BFHI expert team composed of Professors Anita Pavičić-Bošnjak, Milan Stanojević and Josip Grgurić focus on breastfeeding in a humanitarian situation with special reference to COVID-19 pandemic and earthquake in Zagreb. They also bring *Recommendations on Breastfeeding in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic*, shared with the Ministry of Health and published at the Croatian Institute of Public Health web page, in-line with all relevant information on COVID-19. UNICEF globally and in Croatia supports numerous initiatives to promote breastfeeding as one of the child rights. The fact that the academic community in Croatia contributes by providing a valuable insight to bring about a sustainable change and advance the breastfeeding practices, gives me hope that more children in Croatia will soon benefit from this valuable gift. Having in mind the complexity of the necessary support to sustain exclusive breastfeeding for the majority of children, UNICEF remains committed to it with its mandate and mission in Croatia.

Lorna Stemberger Marić, MD, PhD and Srđan Roglić, MD, PhD, are focused on COVID-19 infection in children. Although it may seem that COVID-19 did not seriously affect children, UNICEF has continued the advocacy to prevent this crisis from becoming a child rights crisis. Namely, the most vulnerable children, such as those affected by poverty, exclusion or family violence, are facing even greater risks, being cut off from the existing support.

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For example, treatments for children with disabilities and developmental delays were disrupted with closure of medical settings. All facility-based antenatal classes for expectant parents were cancelled at the time when expectant parents were worried about their unborn baby's health and access to care. Marginalized communities found themselves with less medical guidance than before, as well as a reduced access to social networks. Children victims and witnesses of domestic violence were in an even more difficult situation due to the self-isolation measures and the need to stay home. Primary and secondary schooling moved online and to TV screens, but some children still lacked appropriate infrastructure, support and devices to participate in online learning on an equal footing. Young people with disabilities and their caregivers faced barriers that prevented them from accessing care and essential information to reduce their risk during the COVID-19 outbreak.

In the past months, we have learned how this unprecedented global health, economic and social crisis requires equally unprecedented solidarity. The costs for children are immediate and, if unaddressed, may persist throughout their lives. Yet, they are also things we can fix. By working together, we can ensure this crisis does not threaten social and economic development for a long time and help make families and communities become more resilient. We must take this opportunity to build back better. And we must listen to children and young people, working alongside them to design a better future.

A group of authors led by Branka Golubić are focused on one of the dearest initiatives of UNICEF in partnership with the Ministry of Health, i.e. establishment of the first National Milk Bank in Croatia.

Professor Ivana Borić provides the Situation Analysis of Children's Participation in Croatia, one of the issues that speak directly to the heart of UNICEF. The words from children and young people "nothing about us without us" ought to be at the centre of policies and programmes intended to benefit children and their families (possibilities of local communities in exercising children's rights from the perspective of children).

Professor Ivan Begovac enlightens us on the issues related to family typology. Family is the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members, particularly children. The Preamble of the Convention on the Rights of a Child states that "...recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding". We as UNICEF are guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and strive to establish children's rights as enduring ethical principles and international standards of behaviour towards children.

Professor Josip Grgurić, a dear friend and colleague of UNICEF, whose life has been dedicated to the well-being of children, shares the experience of Gorski Kotar County, the place where he was born, and the place where some right decisions have been taken for children.

Professor Aida Salihagić-Kadić and Snježana Krpes from the Our Children Society (Društvo Naša djeca), a dear UNICEF partner in the implementation of many activities regarding children participation, highlights the importance of partnership as a platform in achieving the well-being of children.

Professor Malenica gives an overview of the university textbook entitled *Preventive and Social Paediatrics*, edited by dear UNICEF friends, Professors Grgurić and Jovančević.

Many thanks to the Palčići NGO which, together with the Bad Blue Boys fan association, provided humanitarian aid to the Zagreb University Hospital Centre, Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics (Petrova) in response to the aftermath of the quake.

And finally, I am using this opportunity to thank all my dear colleagues in the UNICEF Croatia Office for their determination and great commitment in achieving good results for children.

Next year, UNICEF will celebrate its 75th anniversary and 30 years of its presence and work in Croatia, and I cannot thank the authors of this journal enough for "walking with us" on this long journey for children and young people, especially those who are still suffering from poverty, violence and neglect. Although I have been in Croatia for a year, I feel that I have long-life companions and friends in Croatians who are as passionate about children's rights as I am and share UNICEF's mission as much as I do. The authors and readership of this journal are among this group.

With appreciation,

Regina M. Castillo