

A dark blue circle with the word "LUMOS" in white, surrounded by yellow radiating lines.

LUMOS



MOLDOVA CASE STUDY

Global Thematic Review on Education

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This case study focuses on:

- A good practice example of the development of inclusive education systems for children with disabilities as a key element of national care reform efforts.
- An example of a system in which residential education settings were perceived as the responsibility of multiple actors, and in which there has been deep cross-sectoral collaboration to achieve change.

INTRODUCTION

Situated in eastern Europe, Moldova was part of the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991, when the Republic of Moldova was formed. When the care reform process began, Moldova was classified as a lower-middle income country.¹ **Today, Moldova is an upper-middle income country but is still one of the poorest countries in Europe. Despite this, Moldova has made remarkable progress in both implementing wide reaching care reform and developing inclusive education systems.**

Upon obtaining independence, Moldova inherited a system in which institutionalisation was a common response to child welfare concerns, while community-based services to support children and families were lacking.³ In 2007, the government approved the National Strategy and Action Plan for the Reform of the Residential Childcare System 2007-2012, demonstrating commitment at the national level to ensuring children's right to a family life, with the aim of halving the number of children living outside of family environments during the life of the plan.⁴ In 2010, the National Council for Coordinating Reform of Residential Childcare System and Developing Inclusive Education was established to oversee implementation of the National Strategy and Action Plan.⁵ A second Action Plan (2014-2020) was later developed to build on this work.⁶

Moldova has made significant progress in reforming its system of care for children. Between 2007 and 2022, the number of institutions housing children fell from 67 to 9, and the number of institutionalised children reduced from over 12,000⁷ to just 223 in the older-style institutions - 100 of whom had disabilities – and 467 children in placement centres for separated children.⁸ A challenging socio-economic climate and parental migration have continued to be key reasons for family separation, as has a lack of community-based services – including inclusive education – to meet the needs of all children with disabilities and their families.⁹

This case study focuses on the development of inclusive education in Moldova during the transformation of its residential childcare system. It sheds light on both the successes and the lessons learned, which could inform the development of inclusive education systems for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in other countries.¹⁰

FINDINGS

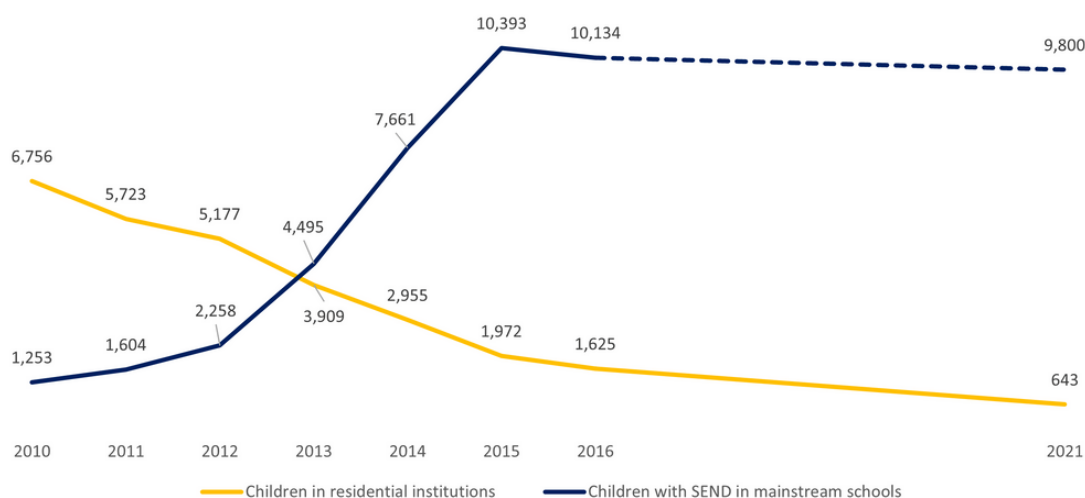
HOW HAVE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION REFORM AND CARE REFORM IN MOLDOVA INTERSECTED?

Reforming the education system has been a key part of a care reform process that has involved the Ministry of Education¹¹ alongside other key government ministries including the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MLSP), who had overall responsibility for care reform.^{12,13} Both the MLSP and the Ministry of Education agreed that reducing institutionalisation was necessary.¹⁴

At the beginning of Moldova’s care reform process, children with disabilities in boarding schools under the Ministry of Education accounted for the majority of children in institutional care.¹⁵ These institutions provided both education and childcare functions, and thus highlighted an intersection between the education and social care/child protection sectors.¹⁶ This meant that, as well as measures to address the social and economic drivers of institutionalisation, the development of a robust system of inclusive education services was key to ensuring successful holistic care reform.

Reforms to enable the development of inclusive education services were underpinned by a legal and policy framework and involved actors from central government, regional authorities, district authorities and local service providers themselves.¹⁷ Civil society organisations have also greatly contributed to the reform process, acting as accelerators and advocates for inclusive education at national and local levels and providing vital technical support and expertise.

The development of inclusive education led to a continuing decrease in the number of children in residential institutions, with more and more children with both special educational needs and disabilities having instead been able to attend mainstream schools (see Graph 1).¹⁸ By 2021/22, 94% of the 101,000 children with SEND enrolled in the education system were attending mainstream schools, with only 6% attending special schools for children with intellectual or physical disabilities.¹⁹ This highlights how important provision of inclusive and accessible education is to enable care reform where a lack thereof is a driver of children entering institutional care, and to increase the number of children with SEND in mainstream schools.²⁰



Graph 1: Change in numbers of children with special educational needs and disabilities in mainstream schools and institutions over time.²¹

This has been achieved by addressing the drivers of institutionalisation, including implementing a systemic approach to developing and strengthening inclusive education services and structures, from central to school levels, which have facilitated the meaningful inclusion of this group of children into mainstream education. Moreover, a specific process to follow for the inclusion of children with SEND into mainstream education was put in place, encompassing an initial, in-depth evaluation of the child's development, confirmation of SEND, and development and review of individual educational plans. Additionally, mandatory training in inclusive education is now given to those training to be teachers at university, and organisations have been set up to provide continuous training for school staff including managers, teachers and staff that provide individualized support to children with SEND (including psychologists and speech therapists), using a curriculum approved at the central level.

The positive effects of inclusive education for children with disabilities were demonstrated through the establishment of an inclusive education unit (IEU) by Lumos in one mainstream school in Ialoveni.²² The Inclusive Education Unit (IEU) enables access to education for children with severe disabilities and complex needs. Children receive education, social and therapies as needed. They are included in the general/mainstream programme with additional support (full, partial or occasional), attending education in regular classes, in small groups and 1:1 in the IEU.

Following the evaluation of the assessment by an international expert, the model was recommended by the Ministry of Education to be replicated in other regions of the country.²³ One young person attending the school commented:

"I think that the [inclusive education] resource centres in schools show the results that the teaching staff have on children at the Resource Centre. For instance, we had a girl in my class, and she was going to this resource centre. And over some years, she caught up with us in studying and other activities. And that was a result that was noticed by the entire school, the entire community." -**School student**²⁴

The development of an inclusive culture which requires changes in attitudes and perceptions of all stakeholders in the education system (managers, teaching and support staff, students, parents, communities, among others) takes time, and other gaps within the system still need to be addressed. For example, interviewees consulted in the preparation of this case study highlighted that:

- There was an initial focus on developing inclusive education within primary and secondary mainstream schools, however the government and other agencies including Lumos are increasingly also focusing their attention on early years provision. At the time of writing, an updated National Program on Inclusive Education is under discussion which will further establish the government's action plan in this regard.
- There continues to be insufficient support for staff working with children with disabilities within the education sector.
- A funding mechanism is needed to support the development of integrated services for children with profound and complex disabilities within education. This would involve a comprehensive, cross-sector and interdisciplinary approach to facilitate joint working between professionals from the health, education and social work sectors within educational facilities, to address the individual needs of the child.
- Mechanisms are needed for assessing how well children with SEND are being included within mainstream settings, as well as for assessing children's progress and development.

IALOVENI INCLUSIVE EDUCATION UNIT (IEU)

In 2016 an IEU opened in one high school in the Moldovan town of Ialoveni. Today, 25 children with severe and complex disabilities attend this mainstream school in the town where they live, just as their peers do. For 15 of them, this is the first time they have had this opportunity. The unit supports them to learn in an inclusive environment and is fully accessible to children with disabilities who would previously have been deprived of education. Pupils with disabilities attend classes in the main part of the school according to their individual needs and preferences, with the option of also attending classes and other support within the IEU as much or as little as they need. The IEU is linked to the main part of the school to enable ease of movement between the two, and children and staff can move freely between the two, demonstrating a principle of inclusion by design.



The IEU has a team of specialist staff, including a coordinator, special education teachers, a psychologist, a speech therapist, physiotherapists, personal assistants and drivers. They support the children while they are in school and adapt their services according to children's individual needs, helping each one to fulfil their potential. Accessible transport enables children to get to the school, special technology is available to help them learn, and there are adjustable desks and chairs. Children receive individual learning support and can access physical and play therapy. There is also a sensory room to stimulate sight, hearing and touch. One child commented on the progress they had made since starting:

*"I started off spending 10 minutes in the (mainstream class) and now I am in it full time."*²⁵

Since the IEU opened, staff and parents have noticed significant progress in children's communication, comprehension, concentration and behaviour. The quotes below are from parents of children attending the IEU, taken from an external evaluation of the service:²⁶

"I used to have to sit permanently with my child... She couldn't attend school. I was so happy when the IEU opened."

"He's made great progress; more independence; more socialising; he's writing now. We understand him so much better."

"When my 9-year-old was in kindergarten, he couldn't speak or hold a pen. [But at the IEU] we've registered good progress. He fulfils all tasks: colours, figures, number, 200-piece puzzle... He's patient and he understands more. It is easier as a mother. He actually runs away back to school. He loves his teachers. We are a united family."

The evaluator noted:

"I also met a young man who had left the [IEU] to become an apprentice shoemaker. He talked about friendships he had made amongst staff, pupils in the Centre and children in the mainstream school. He spoke of the importance of having a job and how this was all possible because of the Centre."

The inclusion of children with disabilities had also benefitted their peers who do not attend the IEU, who have become more empathic, supportive and eager to get involved in activities with their peers who have disabilities. This demonstrates that inclusive education can have positive impacts for all children who experience it.

Although inclusive education policies for primary and secondary education have advanced rapidly since 2011 and there has been much progress in the enrolment of children with special educational needs and children with disabilities in regular schools, children with more complex needs remain segregated and are more likely to be in institutions.²⁷ Recognising this, the Ministry of Education and Research is looking into how the IEU model can be scaled up and implemented across the country.

This is in line with a recommendation from an independent evaluation of the programmes covering the period December 2018 - March 2019,²⁸ which noted that *"Given that legal, normative, methodological, financial and institutional changes have been that made the success of this IEU pilot project possible, there required pre-requisites for the expansion of this model in Moldova and beyond its boundaries"*.

HOW CAN THE MOLDOVAN MODEL OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION BE USED TO INFORM AND INFLUENCE CARE REFORM IN OTHER COUNTRIES?

The learning harnessed from the processes of reforming the system of children's services and building inclusive education in Moldova provides important information which has the potential to influence and guide similar processes in other States. To maximise the sharing of these learnings, government and non-governmental actors, as well as self-advocates with lived experience of residential care – many of whom have special educational needs and disabilities – have participated in a range of conferences, learning exchange visits, and other forums to give actors from other countries the opportunities to learn from Moldova's example.

In particular, Moldova's experience has served as a learning example for Ukraine. The Ukrainian childcare and education systems had clear parallels, both influenced by their countries' past in the Soviet Union. The strategies adopted by the Ukrainian Government to progress care reform and the development of inclusive education prior to the war with Russia, were influenced by models from Moldova.²⁹ This led to tangible results, including a thirteen-fold increase in the number of children with SEND in mainstream schools over a period of five years.³⁰

When interviewed for this Case Study, a representative of the Ministry of Education from Ukraine observed that Ukraine's strategies for residential childcare system reform and inclusive education for children with disabilities were influenced by those of Moldova.

Lumos's Global Thematic Review on education included policy and practice objectives, and as part of this, technical support around developing inclusive education was provided by Lumos in Ukraine based upon learnings harnessed in Moldova. To date, 37 local-level inclusive education strategies have been developed in Ukraine as part of local plans for the transformation of the care system. Unfortunately, the outbreak of war in February 2022 has delayed the implementation of these strategies, but Lumos remains present in Ukraine to provide technical guidance and support with this important work, including guidance on inclusive education.

HOW DO MOLDOVAN EDUCATION AND CARE SYSTEMS ADDRESS THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND FAMILY WHEN RESPONDING TO LARGE NUMBERS OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES?

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 led to a high number of refugees arriving and staying in Moldova, and an urgent requirement on the part of the Moldovan Government to meet their basic needs. In a joint effort to do this, the Moldovan authorities and NGOs including Lumos have provided humanitarian aid, accommodation, and support to access various services (immigration, consular, psychological support, medical, and employment services, amongst others).

Given that many of the refugees are children, great emphasis has been placed on ensuring their right to family and education. The Moldovan Government has adopted the same strategies for educational inclusion of refugee children as for inclusion of Moldovan children with SEND, maintaining a primary focus on children's individual needs. Out of 3,880 refugee children of school age, 1,076 were included in Moldovan schools, and out of 2,273 refugee children of pre-school age, 632 were attending local kindergartens.³¹

Moreover, community schools with high numbers of refugee children, and refugee centres, were connected to high-speed internet and received equipment (computers and tablets) necessary for distance learning, so that refugee children could access education via a distance learning programme.

This case study highlights that the practices employed within the Moldovan education system to ensure equal opportunities for quality inclusive education, have enabled children's right to an education to be fulfilled even in such exceptional circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS

There are several key conclusions to be drawn from this case study of the Republic of Moldova in terms of the interplay of reforms within the social and education sectors:

- The development of inclusive education has demonstrated that it is unnecessary for children with disabilities and special educational needs to live in residential institutions, and that, with the right support and accessible, inclusive services, these children can learn in mainstream educational environments.
- Moldova's successes in reforming the residential childcare system and developing inclusive education are the result of a systemic and collaborative approach involving public bodies from both the education and social care sectors, and key stakeholders such as NGOs. Progress within both processes have been mutually reinforcing and have contributed to a holistic care reform process.
- The Moldovan model of inclusive education and care can provide valuable learning for reforms in other countries, as evidenced in Ukraine. This emphasises the importance of sharing learning between actors interested in or undertaking care reform in different contexts.
- As with any reform, change takes time and there is still work to be done. This highlights the need for sustained commitment to continued implementation, sustainable funding, and monitoring of the reforms over time.

This research has also highlighted several transferable learnings:

- Care reform and inclusive education are integral, overlapping and – to a great extent – indivisible elements of a holistic childcare reform process.
- Even children with the most complex educational needs can learn in mainstream schools, with appropriate support.
- Inclusive educational models can be designed and implemented by involving appropriate stakeholders and ensuring ongoing access to technical expertise and sufficient resources.

ANNEX

METHODOLOGY

Research for this case study included:

- Desk review of relevant policies of the Republic of Moldova relating to children’s rights;
- Desk review of evaluations relating to the implementation of care reform and inclusive education;
- Secondary analysis of legislation and policies relating to child protection and inclusive education, including:
 - o Laws, strategies, programmes, adopted at national level (Parliament and Government of the Republic of Moldova);
 - o By-laws adopted by the Ministry of Education and Research (regulations, standards, instructions)
 - o Other policy documents relating to inclusion of children with SEND;

Key informant interviews with:

- Central public authorities (Ministry of Education and Research, including the two subordinated structures: Republican centre of the psycho-pedagogical support (RCPS) and National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (NAQAER);
- District level public authorities (District Councils (DC) and Departments of Education (DE);
- Education institutions (kindergartens and lyceums);
- Civil society organisations and NGOs;
- Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine.

ENDNOTES

1. OECD (2011). Aid Effectiveness 2011: Progress in Implementing the Paris Declaration – Volume II Country Chapters. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/Moldova%203.pdf> [Accessed 15 Aug 2023].
2. UNICEF (2022). Situation Analysis of Children and Adolescents in Moldova. <https://www.unicef.org/moldova/media/8361/file/Situation%20Analysis%20of%20children%20%20and%20adolescents%20in%20the%20Republic%20of%20Moldova!.pdf> [Accessed 3 Aug 2023].
3. CELCIS (2016). Final Report: Evaluation of the Lumos Deinstitutionalisation Project in the Republic of Moldova districts of Floresti and Ialoveni. Unpublished; on file with Lumos.
4. Evans, P. (2013). Evaluation Report: Implementation of the National Strategy and Action Plan for the Reform of the Residential Childcare System in Moldova 2007-2012. <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Evaluation%20Report%20-%20Implementation%20of%20the%20National%20Strategy%20and%20Action%20Plan%20for%20the%20Reform%20of%20the%20Residential%20Childcare%20System%20in%20Moldova%202007-2012.pdf> [Accessed 6 Dec 2022].
5. Ibid.
6. Action Plan 2014-20. Decision No. 434 on 10.06.2014.
7. Information provided by Government of Moldova, on file with Lumos.
8. Additionally, 57 children were resident in small group homes for between four and six children. UNICEF (2022), op. cit.
9. UNICEF (2022), op. cit.
10. This case study includes references to both children with disabilities, and children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). While there is a lot of overlap between these two groups, they are not interchangeable: not all children with SEND have a disability, and not all children with a disability have SEN. This report refers to children with either/both special needs and disabilities, using the catch-all term SEND.
11. The government ministry responsible for education has been renamed several times since the start of the care reform process: Ministry of Education and Youth (2005 – 2009), Ministry of Education (2009 – 2016), Ministry of Education, Culture and Research (2016 – 2021), Ministry of Education and Research (2021 – present). It will be referred to as the Ministry of Education throughout this report when discussing the work of the department broadly, with specific titles used where relevant, such as in relation to the names of specific pieces of legislation.
12. EveryChild, Oxford Policy Management & UNICEF (2009). Assessment of the Child Care System in Moldova.
13. The government ministry responsible for social protection has been renamed several times since the start of the care reform process: Ministry of Social Protection, Family and Child (2007 – 2009), Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Family (2009 – 2017), Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection (2017-2021), Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (2021 – present). It will be referred to by its current name – the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MSPFCLSP) – in this report when discussing the work of the department broadly, with specific titles used where relevant, such as in relation to the names of specific pieces of legislation.
14. Ibid.
15. Evans, op. cit.
16. EveryChild, Oxford Policy Management & UNICEF, op. cit.
17. For example, the Programme for the Development of Inclusive Education for 2011-2020 was adopted (Government Decision no. 523 from 11.07.2011) and the Education Code was amended (Law of the Republic of Moldova no. 152 from 17.07.2011) to include a chapter dedicated to education for children and students with special educational needs.
18. UNICEF (2022), op. cit.
19. National Bureau of Statistics (n.d.). Educația [Education]. https://statistica.gov.md/files/files/publicatii_electronice/Copiii_Moldovei/Infografice/2022/Educatie.pdf [accessed 3 Aug 2023].
20. In 2012 the number of children with SEND in mainstream schools nearly doubled compared with 2010. In 2010 there were 1253 children, whereas in 2012 there were already 2258 children.
21. Data provided to Lumos by Moldova's Ministry of Education and Research.
22. The Inclusive Education Unit (IEU) enables access to education for children with severe disabilities and complex needs. Children receive education, social and therapies as needed. They are included in the general/mainstream programme with additional support (full, partial or occasional), attending education in regular classes, in small groups and 1:1 in the IEU.
23. Order of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research no. 1327 from 30.11.2020. <https://mec.gov.md> [accessed 16 Dec 2022].
24. Quote sourced from a focus group conducted by Lumos as part of a different research project.
25. Quote from a focus group with children using the IEU, conducted as part of an external evaluation of the service. UCL (2019). Inclusive Education Unit: Inclusion Model for Children with Profound Disabilities and Complex Needs: Evaluation Report. Unpublished – on file with Lumos.
26. Quotes from a focus group with parents of children using the IEU, conducted as part of an external evaluation of the service. UCL (2019). Inclusive Education Unit: Inclusion Model for Children with Profound Disabilities and Complex Needs: Evaluation Report. Unpublished – on file with Lumos.
27. UNICEF (2022), op. cit.
28. Dr. Amelia Roberts, Evaluation report. Inclusive Education Unit. Inclusion model for children with profound disabilities and complex needs.
29. A representative from Ukraine's Ministry of Education who was interviewed for this case study acknowledged that this included: The inclusive education model and national strategy for development of inclusive education in Ukraine; Inclusive education training programmes for professionals, including programmes for advanced and continuous training; Establishment of psychopedagogical support services – inclusive education centres – using the Moldovan model. There were 667 such centres before the war in Ukraine.
30. The number of children with SEND in mainstream schools in Ukraine increased from 2,500 in 2016/2017 school year to 32,686 in 2021/2022, as highlighted in an interview by a Ukrainian official from the Ministry of Education.
31. Ministry of Education data provided in an interview as part of this study.



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