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THE UNITED NATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: UNDP IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY IN MONTENEGRO

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Abstract: *The paper analyzed the challenges of poverty in Montenegro. It provided an overview of the structure and scope of UN action in Montenegro and general sustainable development policies and their national implementation. The objective was to research the contributions of the UN system to the sustainable development of Montenegro while focusing on the role of the UNDP in eradicating poverty. The methodology consisted of the literature overview and the case scenario analysis of integrated social protection and employment policies. In addition, secondary data analysis has been employed to complement the research findings. The paper has identified the national socio-economic situation and the contributions of the UNDP in eradicating poverty through the design and implementation of integrative policies. The research proved the importance of the UNDP in fighting poverty in Montenegro and the effective role of the UN in achieving sustainable development.*

Keywords: *Social Protection; Employment; Poverty; Sustainable Development; UN; UNDP; Activate*

INTRODUCTION

International organizations play a significant role in fostering national development. In Montenegro, the United Nations system has a decades-long presence, focusing on various aspects of social and economic development. The focus has changed over time and, in the present, plays a crucial role in reducing poverty. The contribution in this part has been increased due to the emerging needs caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The new crisis has burdened the social protection system and further slowed the effectiveness of national efforts to reduce unemployment. For these reasons, the UN Country Team in Montenegro has implemented the program 'Activate! Integrated Social Protection and Employment to Accelerate Progress for Young People'.

The research aims to prove the contribution of the UN to the sustainable development of Montenegro and focuses on the role of the UNDP in the fight against poverty. The research methodology includes qualitative analysis based on literature review and quantitative analysis based on secondary data. In addition, research is based on case scenario analysis, specifically on the impact assessment of the program 'Activate!' on poverty reduction. The literature used for the research focuses on sustainable development while also including UNCT publications,

analyses, research, and reports. Additional sources include statistical databases created by UN agencies and state bodies.

The research results prove the significant contributions of the UNDP in the fight against poverty and the UN Family in Montenegro to its sustainable socio-economic development. In the following, the research is displayed in three parts:

- 1) History, role, and structure of the UN system in Montenegro;
- 2) UNDP activities in Montenegro and its fight against poverty;
- 3) Conclusions based on the collected evidence.

THE UNITED NATIONS IN MONTENEGRO

History and Structure of the UN in Montenegro

As an independent state, the Republic of Montenegro became the 192nd member of the United Nations system on 28 June 2006. However, the United Nations' presence in Montenegro began earlier. On 26 June 1945, Democratic Federal Yugoslavia signed the Charter of the United Nations, which started the formation of Montenegro according to the UN values. These multilateral relations were maintained during the existence of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The early activities of the UN on the territory of Montenegro had a predominantly humanitarian and security focus. Priority was given to ensuring peace and stability and socio-economic development, which was regressed by the fight against fascism in WW II.

Following the dissolution of the SFR Yugoslavia amid the Yugoslav wars in 1992, Montenegro continued its multilateral relations with the United Nations system through its membership in the state union of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which consisted of Serbia and Montenegro. However, the newly established republic was not recognized by the United Nations as a continuation of the previous union. However, it was recognized as a successor separately, along with Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nevertheless, the United Nations Secretariat allowed the mission of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to continue operating by accrediting representatives of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to take part in the diplomatic mission. Only after the change of government in 2000, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia re-applied for UN membership.

During and after the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the UN presence in Montenegro continued its humanitarian character caused by mass migrations in the Balkans. In this regard, the International Organization for Migration has played a significant role in achieving the security of citizens from warring states. Their work was complemented by UNICEF and UNHCR, which in the following years opened offices in Montenegro and thus provided basic living conditions for children and refugees from neighboring Yugoslav states.

With the end of the wars in the region, the work of other United Nations organizations in Montenegro began. The presence of the UNIDO agency has been established, with a regional office in Vienna and the presence of other UN organizations, such as the WHO, UNDP, UNESCO, and UNOPS.

Today, the UN Family in Montenegro consists of 15 UN organizations - five resident and ten regionally-based UN agencies, including the following:

- Food and Agriculture Organization
- International Atomic Energy Agency
- International Labour Organization
- International Organization for Migration
- United Nations Environment Programme
- UN Women
- United Nations Development Programme
- UN Economic Commission for Europe
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- United Nations Children's Fund
- United Nations Industrial Development Organization
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
- United Nations Office for Project Services
- World Health Organization

By relying on the statements of the UNCO in Montenegro (2022), it is evident that the Resident Coordinator Office coordinates the work of the UN Family in Montenegro. At the same time, its national program is steered by the Joint Country Steering Committee, co-chaired by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the UN Resident Coordinator. The body is composed of government ministers and the heads of all the resident UN organizations in Montenegro.

The Role and Scope of Functions of UN Agencies in Montenegro

The UN Country Team in Montenegro, through its activities in the areas of human rights and sustainable development, provides support for achieving the 17 interconnected Sustainable Development Goals and enables the realization of national priorities through the application of cutting-edge knowledge and necessary expertise.

The UN Country Team uses the advantages of various UN organizations active in the country to provide the support that meets national needs. By working together, the UN Country Team improves the population's living conditions in the target country, including the most vulnerable, disadvantaged, and those at risk of social exclusion.

Through strong collaboration with the national government, private businesses, NGOs, civil society, and academia, the UN Country Team is implementing the Integrated UN Programme 2017-2021, which aims to accelerate progress and achieve national priorities in line with the process of EU integrations and the 2030 Agenda.

The main contributions are reflected through consulting services, specialized expertise, and access to best practices to improve national development in four strategic Result Areas: Democratic Governance, Economic Governance, Social Inclusion, and Environmental Sustainability. These are also milestones following the current UN country program 2017-2021.

In the democratic governance part, the objective is to develop a "people-centered, accountable, transparent and effective judiciary, while parliament, public administration, and

independent institutions need to ensure security, equal access to justice, and quality services to all people" (UNCT 2020c, 18). This includes the following goals:

- 1) Capacity, efficiency, and transparency of judiciary improved;
- 2) Enhanced citizens' and civil society participation in the creation of policies and legislation;
- 3) Enhanced capacity of the public administration, law enforcement, and independent institutions to ensure security and deliver inclusive people-centered services;
- 4) Improved legislation and policies to meet EU *acquis* requirements and international obligations of Montenegro, including SDGs (UNCT 2020c, 18).

In terms of environmental sustainability, the objective is to achieve sustainable management of cultural and natural resources, as well as to respond more strongly to climate change, but also to reduce the risk of disasters. Key goals in this Result Area include:

- 1) Climate change and environmental targets integrated into national policies and strategies;
- 2) Enhanced energy efficiency and reduction of CO₂ emissions enabled in specific sectors;
- 3) Improved management and treatment of chemicals and all wastes;
- 4) Capacities for resilience to disasters increased (UNCT 2020c, 28).

Further, the objective related to social inclusion implies that by 2021 the population of Montenegro will have better access to a quality system of education, health, protection, and work. These developments are ensured through respect for equality and inclusiveness, the principle of 'leaving no one behind'. Efforts in this area are focused on achieving the following goals:

- 1) Enhanced multisector cooperation, social dialogue, and the capacity of relevant public institutions to provide adequate support and services;
- 2) Social welfare and social protection system have an enhanced capacity for oversight of planning, provision, and coordination of social protection services;
- 3) Improved social and institutional responsiveness towards anti-discrimination and gender equality policies for equal opportunities for women and public awareness of existing violence;
- 4) Innovative solutions are introduced for active participation and empowerment of youth, including those affected by poverty, adversity, and exclusion (UNCT 2020c, 36).

Economic governance takes an important part of the UN program in Montenegro, which becomes more demanding with gradual national development as Montenegro approaches the status of a developed country; economic governance requires greater efforts, including international expertise and collaboration of various stakeholders. By 2021, the objective is to establish an institutional and regulatory framework for sustainable and inclusive economic growth based on innovation, entrepreneurship, and competitiveness (UNCT 2020c, 43).

Work in this Result Area strives towards the following key achievements:

- 1) National policies foster a good business environment and sustainable private sector growth towards increasing competitiveness of the economy;

- 2) National institutions have improved capacities to develop, implement and monitor policies that help generate jobs and move to the formal economy (UNCT 2020c, 43).

The work is coordinated by the Joint Steering Committee, ensuring national ownership and greater involvement of state bodies in the Integrated UN Programme.

Mutual responsibility for the achieved results is ensured and primarily shared by the Government of Montenegro and the United Nations Country Team. Coordination is carried out based on a common mechanism, which ensures collaboration in strategic orientations and decision-making and monitors the implementation of the Integrated UN Programme (UNCT 2016, 38).

The UN Sustainable Development Policies in Montenegro

The UN-specific country programs are derived from the Cooperation Framework. The framework begins and ends with an analysis of the national development landscape and SDG priorities. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030 (UN 2015, 3). The 17 SDGs are perceived as correlated, which is the underlying reason for advocating a balance between social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

The central promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to 'leave no one behind', through which countries seek to advance progress for the most disadvantaged individuals and social groups. In achieving this target, it is needed to include all relevant stakeholders and impose all the available resources, from creativity and know-how to technology and financial resources (UN 2015, 3).

The five UN programming principles of the human rights-based approach, gender equality, environmental sustainability, capacity development, and results-based management are applied across the UN work in Montenegro. With strong national ownership and direct government oversight and participation exercised through the Joint Country Steering Committee and the four Results Groups, the main thrust of the program is implemented by building national capacities at all levels, based on strategic entry points where the UN agencies have particular competencies and comparative advantages (UNCT 2016, 2).

THE UNDP IN MONTENEGRO

Strategical Framework of the UNDP

United Nations Development Programme acts as the leading UN development agency by implementing the SDGs in 170 countries and territories. The approach used is to enhance national progress through the design of integrated solutions. This means focusing on interconnected systemic causes to build responses that address the roots of the challenges.

In order to properly respond to the contextual challenges of the different countries in which UNDP operates, the UNDP Strategic Plan 2022-2025 has been designed. To classify diverse challenges, developments are perceived through three general settings:

- 1) Eradicating poverty;
- 2) Structural transformations;
- 3) Building resilience.

Integrated responses to development are known as 'signature solutions', against which resources and expertise are aligned to make a real impact (UNDP 2021, 9). These responses include the following:

- 1) Keeping people out of poverty;
- 2) Governance for peaceful, just, and inclusive societies;
- 3) Crisis prevention and increased resilience;
- 4) Environment: nature-based solutions for development;
- 5) Clean, affordable energy;
- 6) Women's empowerment and gender equality (UNDP 2021, 6).

Each of the listed solutions represents a mixture of policy recommendations, financial resources, technical support, and program design. Although all of the solutions focus on sustainable development, it is inevitable to enforce them all to achieve the SDGs truly.

The Areas of UNDP Activity in Montenegro

Social Inclusion

According to UNCT (2021), social exclusion in Montenegro predominantly affects vulnerable groups such as the poor and deprived, the long term unemployed, elderly, persons with disabilities, refugees and internally displaced persons, HIV/AIDS affected, Roma and Egyptian minorities, etc. Combating poverty and social exclusion takes more effective and adequate targeting of health, employment, and social services (UNCT 2021a, 40). One of the goals is to advance social inclusion processes, which is done through improved institutional responsiveness and service for the most vulnerable, so all men and women can enjoy a quality life and reach their full potential. By doing this, the UNDP is supporting Montenegro in overcoming social exclusion, poverty, and gender inequality, thus accelerating the country's EU integration agenda (UNCT 2019b, 19).

Democratic Governance

The European integration of Montenegro requires the country to go through fundamental reforms, including the improved democratization of society and upholding of the rule of law. An array of challenges is looming, while the lingering effects of the global financial downturn strain Montenegro's public administration capacities (UNCT 2020a, 2). The goal of overcoming the challenges mentioned above is to advance the democratization of

society. This is done by strengthening the institutions' rule of law, transparency, and accountability, including enhancing civil participation in governance. Achieving such a complex goal requires strong collaboration with the government, a key player in promoting good governance and participatory democracy, and fostering a democratic society that fully respects and protects human rights.

Economy and Environment

More than 60 percent of people living in poverty reside in the country's north, where unemployment is double that of central and southern regions. This even though the north is home to 100 percent of the country's hydroelectric potential, 67 percent of cultivable land, 71 percent of forests, 70 percent of cattle, all of the country's known lead, zinc, and coal reserves, and significant potential for year-around sustainable tourism, which already accounts for 17 percent of the region's GDP (UNCT 2019a, 6).

For these reasons, integrating economic and environmental protection policies is needed to achieve sustainable development. This objective requires several approaches, including advancing market transformation toward low emissions, a resource-efficient economy, and resilient ecosystems and communities. The intention is to create green jobs, generate and conserve income, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions and dependence on energy imports (UNCT 2016, 17).

Gender Equality

In gender equality, the efforts are focused on the equality of women and men to fulfill human rights and human development itself. The promotion of gender equality is central to the mandate of UNDP and intrinsic to its development approach. This includes advocating for equal rights, combating discriminatory practices, and challenging the stereotypes that affect inequalities (UNDP 2019, 7). The UNDP's goal in this Result Area is to support the country to fulfill its commitments toward achieving gender equality and women's empowerment in the Agenda 2030 while mainstreaming gender equality into every aspect of its work and leading by example (UNDP 2019, 8).

Case Scenario: Integrated Social Protection and Employment Policies

As part of the research methodology, a case scenario was used to identify the UNDP's contributions to the fight against poverty in Montenegro. The selected case is based on a program coordinated by the UNDP but jointly implemented by the UN agencies in Montenegro, in cooperation with national partners: the Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Economic Development, and the Employment Bureau, social work centers and civil society organizations (RCO Montenegro, 2021). The core information on the joint program is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: The Joint UN Programme ‘Activate!’ (Source: UNCT 2021)

Program	Activate! Integrated Social Protection and Employment to Accelerate Progress for Young People
Aim	The program aims to enhance the capacities of the social protection system to better serve people in need
Focus	Eradicate poverty in all its forms and dimensions
Signature Solutions	Keeping people out of poverty

The Programme Description

The joint UN project ‘Activate!’ is based on two innovative components: i) simulations of social policies that enable the modeling of social protection reforms, and ii) development of human-centered services tailored for users (RCO Montenegro, 2021).

The project aims to enhance the capacities of the social protection system to serve better to people in need. It focuses on youth, children, migrants, and refugees and addresses the root causes of human trafficking while supporting decent work and employability/skills development. Innovation is used as a key change strategy by applying the advanced methodologies of foresight, human-centered design, and policy simulation tools in order to improve targeting, expand coverage, and address the adequacy of social protection, but also activate Montenegro’s youth who are currently not in education, employment or training (NEET) and other vulnerable and marginalized groups through enhanced labor activation (UNDP *et al.* 2020, 2).

Approach

The expectation is that, by 2022, transformative policy tools will be developed, which have the potential to be replicated across policy areas and scaled up by the Government of Montenegro. These tools will simulate policy impact to ensure effective social protection, which could reduce the poverty rate by three percentage points if there is political commitment. More people, particularly youth, will be reached through labor activation services: these services have been co-designed with the target beneficiaries and therefore address their unique needs. Consequently, previously inactive youth will become contributors to the state budget instead of social assistance recipients (UNDP *et al.* 2020, 3).

Effectiveness

Given that the project is ongoing and results are still being made, there is no final data on the impacts of the UNDP’s policy scenarios in the fight against poverty in Montenegro. However, relevant government officials have publicly expressed their professional opinions on the joint UN action achieved the so-far implemented activities and intermediate results.

Ms. Marija Stajovic, Director General for Social Policy and Child Protection at the Ministry of Finance and Social Protection, pointed out that “social policy simulations significantly help the

ministry in expanding the social protection system in order to reduce poverty and adjust services to the needs of users" (RCO 2021, 1).

Ms. Jevrosima Pejovic, Head of the Directorate for Labor and Employment at the Ministry of Economic Development, reinforces this claim by indicating that "improving the skills and qualifications of young people, especially those in vulnerable groups, are key to reducing their dependence on social assistance and also to their activation in the labor market" (RCO 2021, 1). Since 2017, poverty, as measured by the upper-middle-income poverty rate, has decreased from 19.4% to 18.1%. Montenegro entered 2020 with record-high employment and average GDP growth of 4 percent in the previous five years (UNCT 2020d, 6). However, in 2020, the project was expanded to address the ongoing crises caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic disturbed the socio-economic stability in the country by increasing unemployment and social protection expenditures. Other economic indicators suffered decreased levels, which deepens the gap between the need and the availability of financial resources to provide social protection. As indicated in Figure 1, Montenegro witnessed a sharp fall in real GDP growth, net exports, gross fixed investment, and consumption in 2020.



Figure 1: Decline in Economic Indicators Due to the Pandemic (Source: UNCT 2021b, 7)

As a result, vulnerable social groups in the country fell deeper into poverty. Therefore, the UNDP strived for action by advocating for a responsible and comprehensive response. By the end of 2021, the UN in Montenegro has placed 7.64 million dollars to support the fight against poverty enhanced by the Covid-19 pandemic.

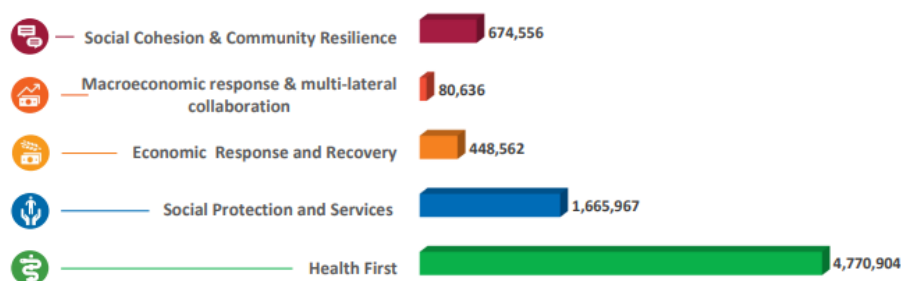


Figure 2: UN Socio-Economic Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic (Source: UNCT 2021b)

Regarding the funds of the program 'Activate!' invested specifically for integrated social protection and employment policies, the UNDP, through a Joint SDG Fund, has placed the following amounts in Montenegro:

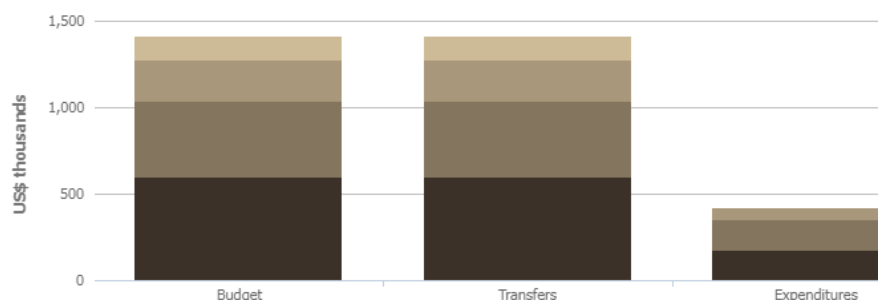


Figure 3: Budget Utilization (Source: MPTF UNDP 2022)

Economic recovery was supported through continuous evidence collection work that enabled situation monitoring and trend analyses throughout the year. Evidence and analyses were used to inform national policies and strategies. A new legislative framework for accelerating the innovation and technological development in the country was adopted, which set key preconditions and enabled the implementation of the government's 'third package of support measures' in support of the businesses to mitigate the negative impact of the Covid-19.

As a part of the efforts to decrease unemployment, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare was provided technical assistance in creating a set of internal procedures for the work of the Employment Agency of Montenegro, required to implement laws on mediation and unemployment rights. Capacities within the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and Montenegrin Employers Federation were strengthened through training, including statistical software for Labour Market Analysis and Measuring Skills Mismatches.

Innovative tools such as individualized service delivery were introduced in employment and social sectors, effectively addressing labor activation challenges (UNCT 2020d, 21). Within the initiative to improve access to employment and enhanced social inclusion through improved local infrastructure in the less developed areas of Montenegro, the UNDP has supported 21 small and medium-sized enterprises and 10 vocational education training providers to ensure that 68 people are trained and 45 jobs created. Support to 47 grant beneficiaries from 4 different grant schemes resulted in the maintenance of the business continuity of SMEs, enabling more than 50 individuals to save their jobs (UNCT 2020d, 25).

Inclusive Labour Market Solutions enabled a mentoring scheme for the unemployed who established their businesses through financial support. This has helped reduce vulnerability on two levels: it supported 65 unemployed women, men, and young people to start and run their businesses, and it contributed to the sustainability of small, new businesses, which were vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic. Labor market activation of the most vulnerable was additionally boosted by developing software to enable interoperability/automatic data exchange between Employment Agency and Social Welfare Information System (UNCT 2020d, 27).

CONCLUSION

Based on the collected evidence, it can be concluded that UNDP significantly contributes to poverty reduction in Montenegro. More generally, the United Nations system in Montenegro contributes to its sustainable development. However, it should be emphasized that not all goals have been achieved. Poverty reduction had a positive trend until 2020, which was interrupted by the emerging crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. As a result, there was no reduction in poverty by three percentage points, as predicted; instead, the poverty level increased. However, without the support of UNDP, as well as other UN agencies, Montenegro would not have access to the needed expertise, research, and consulting services, which served as a basis for planning the recovery of the Montenegrin economy and for providing the necessary social protection to its citizens. In addition, the UN Family raised multimillion funds through international foundations and used them to assist Montenegro in its recovery and development. A significant part of the funds was invested in improving social protection and employment policies, which resulted in numerous benefits for Montenegrin institutions and citizens. In this part, the greatest attention was focused on improving the living conditions of vulnerable social groups, such as young people who are not in the status of employment, education, or training. In this way, UNDP fought to reduce the number of social protection beneficiaries while enabling the creation of new jobs and connecting long-term unemployed people with the supply on the labor market.

Fighting poverty and achieving sustainable national development requires long-term planning, investment, and cooperation. In this regard, the United Nations system is one of the most important partner networks in Montenegro. At the same time, through its long-term engagement in social protection and employment, UNDP makes an outstanding contribution to the fight against poverty in Montenegro. By adopting the new UNDP Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and Agenda 2030, UNDP, with its UN Family partners, proves that it will remain committed to its goal until it is achieved.

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