# ECARO, Switzerland

## Update on the context and trends

Throughout 2023, children across Europe and Central Asia (ECA) faced deeply challenging circumstances. More than 20 million children continued to live in poverty, and families struggled to afford the basics as a cost-of-living crisis persisted. The most marginalised children across the region continued to face a multitude of deprivations, including a lack of access to quality education, shelter, food and health care.

The continuing war in Ukraine further exposed children to violence, loss and disruption, causing immense suffering. Children within Ukraine continue to face a heightened risk of disease, family separation, violence (including gender-based violence), trafficking and unexploded ordnance. Many other children from Ukraine are living outside the country, still urgently requiring humanitarian assistance, particularly those with specific vulnerabilities, including separated/unaccompanied children and those from institutional backgrounds, facing barriers within national child protection frameworks. The situation of refugee children was also exacerbated by educational challenges in 2023. During the year, a significant proportion, close to 50% of refugee children, remained unenrolled in host government schools and at risk of significant learning losses. This has left host countries and the international community with a complex matrix of needs and responsibilities, underscoring the need for structured support and integrative strategies to ensure continued welfare and eventual recovery for the millions of refugees and host communities affected by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.[OB1]
In 2023, the region saw millions of refugees and displaced children. An estimated 361,839 refugees and migrants, including 53,738—30,060 of whom were unaccompanied and separated—arrived in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most came from Afghanistan, Syria and Morocco. Children and families in Türkiye experienced some of the worst earthquakes in the country's history, affecting over 15.2 million people, killing thousands and devastating lives. Other disasters, including floods, mudflows, avalanches, extreme weather, and earthquakes, affected nearly 26,000 people in Kosovo*, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

The region also experienced a decrease in immunisation rates. While regional coverage is relatively high for DTP3, at 94 per cent, measles vaccination has shown lower and decreased coverage in recent years because of the COVID-19 pandemic and an increase in vaccine hesitancy. Over 600,000 children were not immunised against measles in 2023, leading to outbreaks in many countries. Across ECA, measles cases increased 71-fold in 2023 compared to 2022, from 909 to 64,623 cases. The highest numbers of measles cases were registered in Kazakhstan (30,002), Kyrgyzstan (10,112), Türkiye (4,559), Azerbaijan (3,316), and Romania (2,805).

Many children continue to be denied their right to protection. Nearly half a million children, 456,000 across ECA, live in residential care facilities, including large-scale institutions. The rate is double the global average: 232 per 100,000 children live in residential care facilities compared to 105 per 100,000 globally. In Western Europe, the figure is 294 per 100,000 children—nearly triple the global average. Young people struggled with their mental health, giving the region ownership to one of the highest rates of suicide globally.

The learning crisis continues to affect children in ECA, particularly the most marginalised. UNICEF analysis of the latest PISA 2022 data shows that 40 per cent of 15-year-olds in 16 countries across the region have not reached the minimum proficiency in math, reading, and science. Socioeconomic background remains the biggest predictor of success, with children of low socioeconomic status more likely to underachieve.

There was also an important shift in the region's political context, as the European Union officially granted Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine candidate status. This presents key opportunities for UNICEF to support the governments to centre child rights in the legislative, policy and institutional frameworks of their reform agendas in the accession process.

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## Major contributions and drivers of results

**Thriving**

In 2023, programmatic activities in countries **expanded** to include mental and psychological well-being, environmental child health, a stronger focus on parenting support, and the integration of HIV into better-quality perinatal care. UNICEF worked to fully institutionalise developmental monitoring, counselling on parenting practices, and early childhood interventions—including through home visits. Efforts to contain and possibly reverse current trends of decreasing **immunization** coverage were sustained. Activities intensified the strengthening of health systems, including costing exercises to improve the allocation of domestic resources and governance and information system capacity.  Five countries were supported with immunization digitalization and vaccine management, while a key partnership with WHO and Gavi continued and resulted in better aligned support to priority countries to address backsliding and funding support.

Internal actions focused on deepening **collaboration** between health and early childhood development teams. ECARO equipped ROs and COs with adequate capacity and increasing resources to engage more broadly to support and transform national health systems. This has been achieved by leveraging domestic resources, informing national policies and improving delivery and information capacity in countries. Thanks to that approach, the Government of Kosovo allocated EUR3.4 million to the home visiting program to ensure the full national coverage and sustainability; Bebbo application serves 14 countries and reaches over 1 million parents to deliver support on range of health, nutrition and development outcomes and minimize burden on service providers. Another example is the case with Uzbekistan CO where UNICEF's support to the Ministry of Health in efforts to improve nutritional outcomes resulted in the procurement of micronutrient powder from the national budget for 1.4 million young children. In addition, US$ 43.5 million were mobilised from donor funding for perinatal care strengthening, resulting in leveraging domestic resources to improve infrastructure in maternities.

The **nutrition** agenda was sustained and expanded to address the low breastfeeding rates in the region. UNICEF and its partners supported eight countries in the Regional Nutrition Capacity Building and Partnership Platform. Under the broader food systems transformation agenda, three countries were supported to assess the online food retail environments and extent of marketing of unhealthy dietary choices to children with the aim to understand retailer perceptions of the barriers and enablers to creating a healthy food retail marketing environment.

Five countries in the region worked on **environmental and child health**. These efforts generated evidence of climate change's impact on children's health, built health professional capacity to promptly diagnose and treat exposure to environmental risks, and improved lab capacity and preparedness for air pollution and heat waves.

**Learning**

ECARO continued fostering **education system** transformation and inclusivity across the region. Targeted technical assistance guided countries in identifying pivotal shifts and interventions essential for education system transformation and capacity building, particularly concerning inclusive education, digitalization and addressing climate change. Inclusive education reforms were accelerated through technical support, cross-country knowledge sharing, and disability inclusion advocacy.

Note: This report contains data as of refreshed date 19.04.2024 07:53 PM EST.          Report Generated on: 19.04.2024 11:55 PM

ECARO formally partnered with the OECD to analyse student learning using the PISA 2022 results in five Western Balkan and four Eastern Partnership countries.

Launching a regional strategy and tailored support significantly boosted UNICEF contribution to digital transformation of education systems. Notably, ECARO supported Ukraine in formulating its digital learning strategy amid the crisis and provided coordination and monitoring support for Learning Passport implementation in Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and Poland.

ECARO supported **Ukrainian refugee children's** learning through regional guidance on language integration and technical assistance in inclusive education, working alongside partners and assuming education programme leadership where needed.

Additionally, ECARO deepened expert guidance on the region's early childhood education and care (ECEC) reform agenda, strengthening access to early education and connecting the 0-3 and 3-6 service sectors and ministries in a coherent ECEC system. Nine countries across the region received support and technical guidance on national reforms to diversify preschool education delivery and accelerate access. UNICEF also strengthened parenting support for families with young children.

**Protecting**
ECARO continued supporting governments across the region in implementing **deinstitutionalization** and childcare reform. In 2023, this included technical guidance in white papers on boarding schools and foster care. A multi-country evaluation on deinstitutionalisation and childcare reform progressed; once finalised in 2024, the findings should accelerate reforms across the region. ECARO also delivered intensive technical support to all country offices and teams on deinstitutionalisation and childcare reform.

**Child-friendly justice** was strengthened across the region with a training-of-trainers programme on Child-friendly Legal Services piloted in six countries, with full roll-out supported in Türkiye. UNICEF has supported the establishment of child-friendly justice services using the Barnahus model across ECA; in 2023, documentation of the challenges and lessons learned in six countries began. Further technical support took the form of five advocacy briefs on prevention, diversion, fair trial, alternatives to detention and detention.

Child protection was pivotal to ECARO's response to the **Ukrainian refugee crisis**. In addition to providing technical support to strengthen national child protection systems in Ukraine and host countries, achievements included facilitating access to safe spaces and protection hubs, case management, GBV programming, and support to unaccompanied children. Strong partnerships enabled over a million children and caregivers to benefit from MHPSS. An important area of intervention was coordinating child-friendly alternative care for children evacuated from care settings in Ukraine and preventing unsafe returns. Digital innovations, such as online safe spaces and an e-learning course on GBV response, increased the reach of interventions. The ECARO team also worked on harmonising child protection data systems to improve data quality and policymaking.

In response to the separate refugee and migration crisis in the **Mediterranean and Western Balkans**, UNICEF reached 43,459 children with child protection services and over 28,000 children gained access to education. In Greece, 7,361 children benefited from mental health and psychosocial support in Mother and Child Spaces and education settings. In Bulgaria, UNICEF supported the release of 831 children from detention, ensuring their placement in reception centres. An Early Childhood Development Emergency training package was introduced in Serbia, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, UNICEF spearheaded child protection coordination efforts, facilitating the development of advocacy messages and a capacity-building programme. ECARO engaged with UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office to advance rights, protection, and care for all children on the move along the Mediterranean Sea route.

**Equity: Social Protection, Child Poverty, and Investments in Children**
The year saw increased strategic partnerships and technical engagements in **public finance for children**. Several countries documented successes in increasing public finances for children, such as increased financing for social protection in Armenia and education in Montenegro. Partnerships with critical IFIs were strengthened, particularly for joint capacity development activities focused on governments.

Work in **social protection** focused on ensuring that COs can support the delivery of social protection in emergencies, as this was an area where COs' experience was limited before the refugee crisis. Capacity building included the first regional training on humanitarian cash transfers (HCTs) for the programme and operations staff from 15 offices and training for governments in five countries on cash in emergencies. HCTs reached over 225,000 households across ten countries, with nearly US$ 75 million in funds disbursed to country offices. ECARO also developed a draft strategy for shock-responsive social protection and HCTs.

ECARO worked to consolidate UNICEF's regional leadership on **disability-inclusive social protection**, developing regional guidelines for CRPD-compliant budget analysis and formulating a social policy offer for the regional Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy action plan. In the refugee response, UNICEF supported governments in providing cash support to refugee children with disabilities and leveraged these partnerships to contribute reforms in national disability assessment systems.

**Child poverty** received renewed focus in Central Asia, where UNICEF supported three countries in developing multidimensional child poverty measurement methodologies and producing child poverty analysis for the first time.

**Gender dimension**
ECARO provided technical support to strengthen gender integration into programme work to all 22 COs in the region and the RROs. This included Gender Programmatic Reviews (GPRs) and analysis of GPR implementation; extensive technical reviews planning documents; in-person technical missions; and in-depth sessions to consider the Regional Gender Results Report 2022 and its implications for strengthening country programme work. Webinars targeting the regional Gender Network covered gender-transformative programming and advancing girls' skills in STEM and digital interventions. ECARO reviewed and analysed work plans for Ukraine refugee response countries to ensure gender integration and the Core Commitments for Children. ECAR's compliance with the GAP Institutional Benchmarks was the highest of all regions globally.

**Young people**
Adolescents and youth have been among the groups of the population most affected by recent crises. As a response, ECARO strengthened its youth participation and development programming by supporting all 22 COs and four refugee response offices to increase youth access to relevant and gender-sensitive policies, information and services, build their skills and resilience, and support digitalization and innovation initiatives. With the assistance of 5,000 volunteers in the response, 416,613 Ukrainian adolescents and young people accessed formal and non-formal education opportunities, while 118,000 participated in youth engagement actions.

Youth voices were also brought to the forefront of inclusiveness, learning-to-earning transitions, mental health and climate initiatives. Over 100,000 responses from young people to regional polls through U-Report and other platforms were recorded in 2023.

**Humanitarian situation**
In 2023, ECARO provided in-country or remote emergency **response coordination**, resource mobilisation, and reporting support for Ukraine, Türkiye, Armenia, Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and

the Ukraine refugee receiving countries. UNICEF country offices' **emergency preparedness and response capacities** were enhanced through in-country training in Kyrgyzstan, Romania, and subregional emergency preparedness training in the Western Balkans, covering Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

In the Western Balkans and Caucasus, technical and strategic guidance, partnership building, and resource mobilisation helped strengthen sustainability and climate change agendas, including environmental health, adaptation and environmental policies, strategies, and plans. UNICEF helped address deficiencies in policies, standards, budgets and monitoring systems for water, sanitation and hygiene across Central Asia and the Caucasus. ECARO also contributed to efforts to amend the EU Directive on Ambient Air Pollution.

**Influencing global and regional discourse and policy**Public advocacy and communication.
In 2022-2023, ECARO issued 68 press releases and statements generating almost 88,000 mentions in media outlets across the world, ensuring that children's rights and the impact of multiple crises on children's wellbeing continue to be at the centre of the ongoing news cycle and securing UNICEF's position as the leading voice for children's rights. On digital platforms UNICEF reached 83.4 million users with 11.4 million people engaging with UNICEF content, 3.4 million users visited the ECARO website, and nearly 2 million visited the ECARO YouTube channel in 2022-2023. Advocacy actions focused on European Immunization Week, the refugee crisis in Armenia, Ukraine war, inclusive education, and the increased number of tragedies at sea on the Mediterranean migration route.

**Cross-cutting Strategic Planning**
ECARO undertook a mid-term review of the Regional Office Management Plan, including a recalibration of UNICEF flagship results for the region. In support of COs, five programme reviews were completed to help move towards adaptive programming. ECARO supported the rollout of electronic workplans and steered the streamlining of results frameworks prioritizing the use of Core Standard Indicators. These efforts are already increasing the efficiency of programme implementation and monitoring.

**Evaluation and Research**
ECARO Evaluation Section finalised two strategic evaluations: a) Evaluation of the Refugee Response, which resulted in a coordinated HQ/RO management response that is also informing the humanitarian review happening in 2024; b) Evaluation of the Preparatory Stage III of the European Child Guarantee, which also includes strategic recommendations for UNICEF and member states. ECARO finalised the work on Evaluating digital innovations, which included the preliminary findings of the evaluation of the Bebbo Parenting App and Here4U in Italy, using robust methodologies and digital randomised control trials. This evaluative work has also informed the monitoring evaluation and learning framework for innovation led by the Office of Innovation and the basis of the research and development component that should accompany any regional innovation. The section also finalised the guidance on using MICS, MICS+ and other household surveys as well as using internal databases for evaluations, aiming to promote synergies and efficiencies within different evidence functions.

**Partnerships and engagement**
In 2023, ECARO expanded and further strengthened its strategic partnerships with EU institutions, engaging with international financial institutions, such as the Islamic Development Bank, in new thematic areas by using sub-regional approaches, mobilising quality resources for the Ukraine crisis and the Türkiye earthquake and leading the strategic partnership with the Russian Federation to support humanitarian responses globally. Private sector revenue increased year-on-year from US$10 million in 2022 to US$17.5 million in 2023.

**Social and behavioural change (SBC)**

ECARO enhanced its support to COs to strengthen the quality of SBC programming and increase SBC mainstreaming into UNICEF's and countries' programmes. Efforts were undertaken to support COs in systematically integrating SBC within annual work plans and country programme documents into sector-specific system-strengthening initiatives. ECARO developed an SBC roadmap outlining key actions and products to be developed to support SBC integration within UNICEF and government institutions. RO actively supported the application of behavioural science to inform national policies and programmes through research, supported the design and implementation of behavioural insight solutions, and delivered training on SBC and applied behavioural science to UNICEF staff.

**Technology for development**
In 2023, ECARO provided technical support and guidance to COs to implement and expand technology-driven solutions, facilitate knowledge exchange, enhance capacity-building efforts, and foster enduring partnerships. These included digital solutions to support immunization programmes and supply chain management; an online and offline digital learning platform that enables continuous access to quality education, and the scale-up of Bebbo, a digital parenting app, supporting early childhood development and parental wellbeing in 14 countries, with more than 1.2 million downloads.

**Internal Management**
Effective governance mechanisms and internal controls were maintained and adapted to the new context and scale of budget throughput over 2023. The RO continued to provide oversight, technical guidance and quality assurance for work processes, internal controls and cost effectiveness in areas of Finance, HR, ICTD, Security and Audit to countries in the region. A regional security risk management strategy was developed and is being implemented with a focus on developing a UNICEF ECA security culture through empowerment, compliance, and mainstreaming.

**One UNICEF Response**
ECARO continued to respond to the **Ukraine emergency**, maintaining an efficient and agile office, strong governance mechanisms, and fostering internal and external partnerships. By the end of 2023, over 1.3 million children and caregivers had accessed mental health and psychosocial support, nearly 350,000 women and children received primary health care services, and 1.26 million children benefitted from formal and non-formal education, including early learning. Over 23.4 million people were reached with messaging on prevention and access to services. Moreover, over 76,000 households received cash transfers through UNICEF technical assistance, and 29 UNICEF-UNHCR Blue Dots were operational across refugee-hosting countries.

In **Italy**, in close synergy with its implementing partners and with the UN agencies responsible for the protection of migrants and refugees, UNICEF reached more than 19,000 refugee and migrant children and youth and caregivers with a large range of child-protection interventions and more than 160,000 individuals accessed GBV risk mitigation, prevention and response interventions. MHPSS has been mainstreamed in all emergency interventions, while some interventions with specific partners focused on psycho-social support (ARCI, TdH). In addition, skills building continued expanding in the education system, both in relation to 21st century skills in schools with vulnerable students and Italian language literacy for foreign students.

In **Poland**, UNICEF continued supporting refugees in partnership with and support to the host government systems, focusing on access to alternative care for 4,823 Ukrainian refugee children, support to children evacuated from alternative care of Ukraine to Poland, and support the capacity of key ministries, municipalities and civil society partners. UNICEF worked with local partners to improve access and quality of ECCE through the professional development of frontline workers, managing multicultural groups, providing mental health and psychological support to 842,533 children and caregivers, and teaching Polish as a second language. It also initiated policy dialogue on accessible and inclusive education. Working on mental health and promoting the psychosocial well-being of children, adolescents, and young people in schools and community settings was adequately integrated

into the response. An effective collaboration with the Ministry of Health on vaccination campaigns and awareness messages helped improve awareness and vaccination uptake among Ukrainian refugees. In the **Czech Republic**, over 44,000 people—over 31,000 refugees and 22,571 children—benefited from services in education, health, child protection and social cohesion-related activities specifically targeting adolescents and youth in partnership with the Municipality of Prague. Over 63,000 women and children from Ukrainian refugee and host communities gained access to primary healthcare services, and 37,500 children under 15 were vaccinated. Addressing a shortfall of healthcare workers, over 800 Ukrainian health professionals were supported to acquire Czech accreditation and employment through language and medical courses. More than 200,000 children and caregivers, including refugees, accessed MHPSS, over 340,000 people were provided access to safe spaces, protection, and support hubs, and over 3,600 children received individualised case management. Over 4.7 million people were reached through messaging on prevention and access to services.

Following advocacy by United Nations agencies and other partners in **Slovakia,** the government granted universal health coverage for Ukrainian children under 18 in January 2023 and, since September 2023, for all adults. In total, 27,771 children and women received primary health care services. UNICEF enabled 90,194 children to access formal and non-formal education, including early learning, and 38,586 to receive learning materials.

In **Hungary**, a strategic partnership between UNICEF, four Hungarian municipalities and four CSOs underpinned child protection programmes, strengthening child protection capacity and infrastructure to support refugees and highly vulnerable local communities, with 34,366 individuals benefiting from access to safe spaces and protection. In Debrecen and Gyor, 5,441 children and women accessed UNICEF-supported health services, while across the country 60,775 refugee and vulnerable children from host communities accessed inclusive formal and non-formal education, including early learning, with UNICEF support. The HCT programme reached nearly 4,000 refugee children and pregnant women.

## Lessons Learned and Innovations

Heightened vulnerability to hazards and humanitarian crises highlighted need for increased investment and varied approaches to enhance **emergency preparedness.** Efforts included country and sub regional (Western Balkans) emergency preparedness and response trainings and simulations, building programme, operations and management emergency capacities, and development and piloting of a successful sub-regional training on humanitarian cash transfers in Central Asia. Strategic partnerships, including with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, leveraged to strengthen preparedness, disaster and climate resilience capacities in Central Asia, in close collaboration with emergency, education, social protection and WASH authorities and complementing the mandates and comparative advantages of each organisation. Finally, prioritization of emergency preparedness for Armenia, including investment in field level capacities, supply prepositioning and contingency partnerships, proved invaluable in enabling UNICEF to mobilize response capacities in the first 24 hours of the refugee crisis that unfolded in September 2023.

With several ongoing emergencies in the region, ECARO, RROs and COs scaled up operations, including hiring new staff. To address the lack of a comprehensive one-stop-shop orientation package for general support and programme associate staff new to UNICEF, ECARO Operations developed a comprehensive training and induction package, including an overview of UNICEF programming processes and detailed instructions, videos and tools to support the work of newly hired staff. To help ensure young children **thrive**, ECARO's health and ECD teams collaborate closely to deliver better results for children. This work focuses on primary health care and community health, with an equity approach. PHC and home visiting are common platforms that all programme areas will support and benefit from, leveraging UNICEF multisectoral approaches with a systems approach that promotes resilience.

UNICEF's inclusive **education** agenda has gained traction in Central Asian and refugee response countries. However, this has also revealed systemic gaps in ensuring quality education and learning for all children.

For knowledge sharing and exchange, ECARO supported documentation of several case studies of best practices from countries that are advanced in inclusive education.

Despite progress, challenges persist in integrating refugee and migrant children into formal education due to gaps in national education systems. ECARO accelerated advocacy efforts through high-level conferences and events, focused on promoting inclusive education reforms (Poland, Slovakia), as well as developing a comprehensive data model to address the lack of reliable data on refugee children's access to education.

While UNICEF research has found a reduced proportion of children living in **residential care** facilities in many countries, there has been little progress for children with disabilities. In countries where data is available, children with disabilities account for between 4 per cent and 86 per cent of children in residential care facilities. In more than half of countries with available data, the proportion of children with disabilities in all types of formal residential care has increased between 2015 and 2021. While we have a long way to go before ending ECA's long and painful legacy of institutionalisation of children, the report provides critical evidence to support the progress already being made by decision-makers and service providers.

Support for shock-responsive **social protection** must focus on strengthening resilient systems that can reduce vulnerabilities and scale up support during shock. It must also increasingly demonstrate and recognise the role of social protection in achieving equitable climate action. UNICEF must be able to scale up timely cash transfers through governments and directly: this involves building capacity among emergency, social policy, and operations colleagues.

The recent and ongoing crises in the region have disproportionately impacted **youth**, showing the importance of engaging them systematically in issues affecting their lives through recognising them as leaders, influencers, motivators, educators and young experts. Relevant and sustainable mechanisms for youth engagement and consultations continued to be required. Both governments and multilateral partners recognised the power of engaging with youth as partners by providing them with the necessary support and opportunities and placing them in a unique position to foster cross-country connections and inter-generational relationships to contribute towards more cohesive communities, countries and a region. This provides UNICEF with critical opportunities to build sustainable systems for youth participation/engagement and   partnering with young people for improved mental health, climate action, jobs and social cohesion. Linkages between the youth agenda and the global development and peace agendas will need to be strengthened, and the future "post-SDG" priorities for the Region and globally will be co-designed with youth.  Policy frameworks for the ECA region, including the EU Youth Strategy, Youth Action Plan (DG INTPA), EU4Youth (DG NEAR), Youth Guarantee for the Western Balkans, DARYA programme for Central Asia (DG INTPA), and the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec (2017) on youth work, will guide UNICEF's efforts for system strengthening and sustainability.

While capacity building on **gender** has significantly improved across the region with resources and practical sessions, a greater focus on gender transformative programming, harmful gender norms, strengthening gender data, ensuring investments and focused results in multiple sectors to advance convergent approaches and results for adolescent girls remain continued as priority actions for the region, and this takes all sectors to contribute as well as leadership and sectoral accountability. Additionally, the cross-sectoral programming gaps, lack of targeted funding for gender equality outcomes and growing Gender Equality backlash in the region have led to field implementation challenges in several countries.

Increasing demand for **digital solutions** to enhance programme outcomes requires additional resources at regional and country offices to facilitate digital transformation within programmes. In addition, there is inadequate oversight due to limited capacity, impeding effective coordination and adherence to organisational policies. These challenges are intensified by inconsistent governance, inadequate risk assessment, and poor mitigation measures during the design phase, exposing them to various risks, including cyber-attacks, unauthorised access, and compromising sensitive data. In November 2023, ECARO released its Regional Digital Learning and Transformation of Education Strategy to help address some of these challenges.