

Education for all: Breaking the cycle of poverty



CONCORDIA Social Projects Position on Education



CONCORDIA is a non-governmental and non-profit organisation present in Austria, Bulgaria, Kosovo, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Germany and Switzerland dedicated to delivering social and educational services in support of disadvantaged children, young people and their families towards an independent and self-determined life. In our Day centres and through our outreach and community work services, we provide coordinated support to prevent family separation and endeavour to keep children close to their parents, families and communities and to contribute to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty¹.

In CONCORDIA our teams work daily with children, youth, young adults² and families who miss(ed) out on basic education. Those children, who are born into poor families with limited or no resources, are very likely to grow up to live in poverty as well, which leaves generations stuck in this trap, with no opportunities to advance themselves. We know that there is hope for breaking the cycle of poverty. One of the biggest contributions is ensuring children have access to education. Girls and boys, who are not in school are at greater risk of exploitation and early marriage. They are on track for a much lower income once they grow up. This limits the future of their children, thus repeating the cycle of poverty generation after generation. The current paper: „Education for all: Breaking the cycle of poverty” connects all CONCORDIA Social Projects (further called CONCORDIA) educational interventions in Austria, Bulgaria, Kosovo, the Republic of Moldova and Romania. We believe that access to life-long quality education is the single most important factor in stopping the transmission of poverty from parents to children. It can provide job opportunities, resources and skills that equip individuals and their communities with assets for a self-determined future. Balanced with the rest of the CONCORDIA programme pillars (childcare, community-based intervention, employment and social business and empowerment), access to quality education can be the key to raising the economic and emotional well-being of individual households, helping to break the poverty cycle and ensure sustainable livelihoods.

CONCORDIA’s vision accompanies children and adolescents up until the age of 35 years on their journey towards a self-determined life outside of marginalisation and supports families in staying together.

Safety, access, diversity, inclusion, individual approach and equity as our guiding principles for quality education

At CONCORDIA, we combine our educational interventions with a needs-oriented socio-pedagogical approach, because we believe that if we create an environment that enhances well-being, supports holistic learning and social inclusion through empowering relationships, we can make a positive difference not just for individual young people, but for entire communities. We create a learning environment which concentrates on the individual needs of the young person and in which young people can flourish to support them in unfolding their potential. We focus on the strengths and not on the deficits of a person, making use of tools with which each young person can grow and become more independent.

CONCORDIA educational approach is guided by Articles 28 and 29 of the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**³, therefore, we see education as a fundamental human right based on equal opportunity. The exclusion from and within education is a fundamental violation of a child's rights.

At the same time, CONCORDIA works in support of the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goal 4 - Education**. SDG 4 is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all and has seven targets:

1) free primary and second education

2) equal access to quality pre-primary education

3) affordable technical, vocational and higher

4) increased number of people with relevant skills for financial success

5) elimination of all discrimination in education

6) universal literacy and numeracy

7) education for sustainable development and global citizenship

However, still, many of the young people we work with have no or limited access to quality education. Despite EU laws, children are being excluded from learning with their peers and are being discriminated against because they come from deprived communities, have a disability, are female, were left behind by their family or belong to an ethnic minority. Romn*ja children and their future success in life are still highly affected by their experience of high school drop-out rates, absenteeism and segregation. So are the left-behind children in Moldova or those affected by poverty or forced to flee internal conflicts.

At CONCORDIA, we want to bridge this divide by standing for diversity, inclusion and equity in education. This means we address institutional barriers and actively combat social and racial discrimination by investing in young people who face marginalisation and segregation. By educating children and young people, regardless of their social background, religion or gender, we engage with them and their families and enable them to gain skills and have equal chances in the local society. We work closely with local institutions and relevant stakeholders to ensure stable partnerships and systemic change among the affected communities.

Our statements are grounded in our core values⁴ hence we put the support of young people's well-being, learning and social inclusion at the centre of our work.

This paper builds on 30 years of experience in the organisation and is a result of the joint efforts of the nine members of the CONCORDIA Education Working Group, who came together, shared their experiences, discussed studies and educational concepts and summarised them for practical use. This résumé outlines the main CONCORDIA interventions and the important and current positions on the topic of education.

Promoting Children's Rights for Children and Young People at Risk

CONCORDIA's work is meant to protect all children's rights as stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as in the National Legislation, regarding promoting and respecting children's rights of the countries in which develops services. In all actions with and for children, CONCORDIA is committed to safeguarding children and reporting and responding to any alleged abuse, taking all the measures as stipulated in CONCORDIA Child Protection Policy⁵ and the internal national policies and procedures. We make sure that the "Do No Harm"⁶ principle is incorporated at all organisational levels avoiding negative impacts in terms of safeguarding, equality, dignity, non-discrimination or the right to a healthy environment.

We at CONCORDIA believe that by promoting children's rights, we can provide a platform for healthy personal development and mutual respect that underpin stable societies. In our everyday work, we introduce children and young people to basic human entitlements and fundamental principles of justice. This encourages discussions of what rights mean for individuals and societies, how rights can only have meaning if they are balanced by responsibilities and how young people can and do exercise their rights in everyday life. By making sure rights are familiar and accurately comprehended, communities and individuals can also play their part in promoting balance by taking responsibility that rights are acknowledged and respected.

Access to Quality Education in our Project Countries

Young people need to continually enhance their knowledge, skills and attitudes to not only keep them alive but to thrive. Those three are major factors in finding fulfilling jobs and becoming an independent citizen⁷. But while participation in education is improving in some places, access to learning opportunities remains profoundly unequal, and millions continue to be left out. From the pandemic to the climate crisis to the digital revolution and armed conflicts around the world, we know that today, more than ever, it is critical to ensure access to quality education and learning opportunities for everyone.

In Romania, one in eleven children goes to bed hungry and 18% of schoolchildren drop out of school. In families with parents who have received only lower secondary education or less, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for children aged 0-17 is 75.1% (Eurostat data Romania). According to SOS Children's Villages⁸, Bulgaria has the highest rate of child poverty in the European Union, with more than half of children living in or at risk of poverty. Besides child discrimination, lack of education is one of the leading factors which contribute to child poverty in the country. Even though the Bulgarian government mandates the provision of cost-free pre-primary education, many areas do not have the resources to provide this free of charge. Without the guarantee of high-quality education in an environment conducive to learning, it is difficult for children to escape generational poverty.

Kosovo and the Republic of Moldova remain the two poorest countries in Europe with an estimated poverty rate above 26%⁹. As a result, children's access to health, education and other social services remains limited, especially for the most disadvantaged. In Kosovo, children from Romn*ja, Ashkali and Egyptian communities are particularly underserved, as are those who live in rural areas. Girls are especially at risk of early school drop-out as they are forced into child marriages. After the pandemic placed enormous pressure on the Republic of Moldova, the current conflict in neighbouring Ukraine is estimated to bring 54% of the population at high risk of falling into poverty¹⁰. According to the latest data, around 21% of children (150,000) in the country have at least one parent living abroad, while approximately 5% of children (35,000) have both parents abroad¹¹.

The number of children enrolled in education is decreasing, with children from rural or low-income households being seriously impacted and facing significant barriers to accessing basic education. In Austria, a successful educational future still depends very much on the social background, keyword „educational heredity“. Children with a migration background are particularly affected by the systemic inequality of opportunity in the education system and are less likely to participate in the secondary education system (Statistic Austria 2022: 100). Many parents feel overburdened with after-school learning support for their children, both professionally and in terms of time.

Creating Opportunities for All – Our Approach

CONCORDIA teams work to make sure that all children and young people can go to school every day. We are aware that many children face more than one obstacle when they want to participate in quality education, such as: not being hungry, having proper clothes and all necessary textbooks and learning materials, having access to transportation and a healthy environment to encourage them on their path. We believe we cannot do it all alone: We also work with teachers, partner organisations and decision-makers to ensure that whilst at school, children and young people enjoy a respectful and encouraging environment, where their talents are cultivated. With more children staying in school, we see that the improved learning outcomes ultimately lead to higher personal well-being and access to other and more opportunities.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

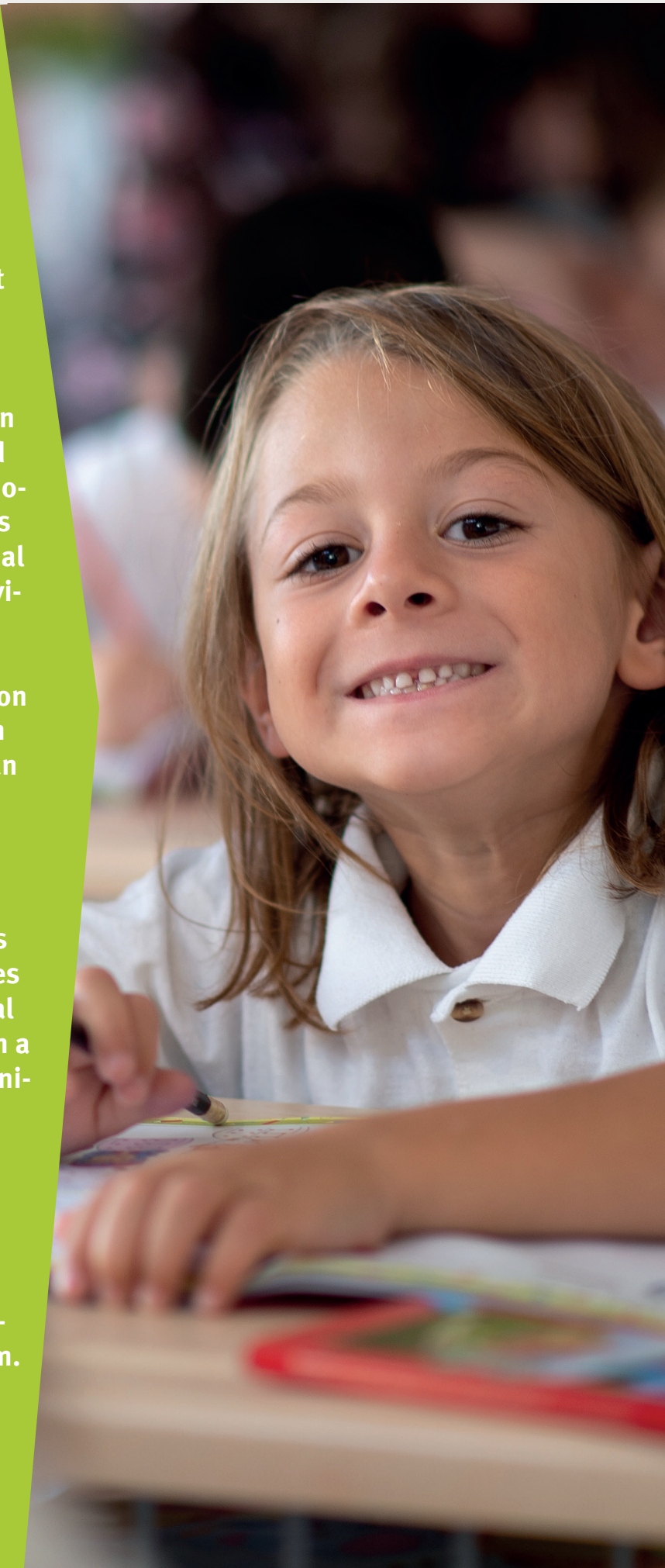
- › We support every child, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, descent national or ethnic origin or social, cultural or economic background to develop and learn together with their peers in a meaningful way to develop their full potential.
- › We work towards equal access for all to quality education and for all to be able to participate equally in quality education (rights-based approach).
- › We see children and their individual needs, abilities and strengths in the centre of education, and we believe the responsibility of adaptation lies on the education system rather than the individual child.¹²
- › We actively work to ensure that children are not just being equipped with knowledge, abilities and values, but also with an enthusiasm for learning.

› We work with a set of resources, aptitudes or predispositions that make it possible for the individual child or youth to attend school with success by recognising the social conditions that might hinder the process. We provide support in accessing good nutrition and health, and contribute to the socialization and emotional intelligence of the students as well as to their academic needs, through remedial education and targeted educational activities.

› We use formal and non-formal education to develop competencies among children and youngsters that will help them live an independent life:

› We define **formal education** as a structured education system that runs from nursery to university and includes specialised programmes for vocational training. Formal education is based on a curriculum and usually leads to recognition and certification.

› We define **non-formal education** as planned, structured programmes of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competencies, outside the formal educational curriculum.



Education in CONCORDIA –

Give children wings

Priority 1: Early childhood development

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasised that the child’s right to education begins at birth and that the right to maximum development through education must be recognised in early childhood (see source above). In CONCORDIA we believe that pre-primary school education (from birth to school start) is an indispensable part of a child’s journey. Learning by playing helps children to fulfil their potential and to have a successful start at school. Worldwide, vulnerable children are disproportionately excluded from quality pre-primary education – even though it can have the greatest impact on them. In all the countries, where we work, CONCORDIA commits to offer opportunities for early education, prioritising the poorest and hardest-to-reach children. Our multi-disciplinary teams daily welcome preschool-aged children and offer them an all-day holistic support which includes psychosocial, cognitive and physical development where individual talents and strengths are being promoted. Our teams work in co-operation with the parents and communities, engaging them in the development of their children, as well as with a range of institutions and authorities, which is essential for achieving sustainable impact on a local level.

Priority 2: Basic education (primary and secondary school)

Since its formation in 1991, CONCORDIA aimed to enable disadvantaged children and young people to go to school every day. Over time we learned that education is no longer only what takes place at school and is not only for those who can reach school. Following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child¹³, which promotes all children and youngsters, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, verbal or other abilities, we created a socio-inclusive approach which ensures access to education for all - including children from disadvantaged marginalised groups or areas. Through our innovative programmes, such as the CONCORDIA Network of Day Centres, we help children and young people at risk to complete school and to develop as a person, feeling ready and empowered to embrace the challenges they are confronted with. Via informal educational and recreational activities, our participants are allowed to acquire knowledge, skills and abilities, which are essential for a life lived independently and with human dignity. Next to traditional learning support, we focus on learning social manners, sports and musically creative content, as well as innovative teaching forms that put the child at the centre of all educational efforts. Innovative formats, such as “storytelling cycles” and “children’s parliament” meetings, give time and space for active social exchange where children can communicate their new ideas, feelings or challenges which leads to the development of their social skills.

In CONCORDIA Primary School¹⁴ we are not talking about a pedagogical concept only, but a socio-pedagogical intervention as such. Social and pedagogical must go together, the social part being an integrative element of our work that is not only represented by the existence of social assistance but anchored across all services and processes that we offer. The educational success of students strongly depends on the parental home and physical and psychological well-being. A good collaboration between school and family or the pedagogical staff and parents shows various benefits: for the students (through higher performances), for the parents (by better understanding of the educational process) and for the teachers (by more support in their teaching activities). It also promotes mutual sympathy and appreciation, awakens understanding of the different roles and helps to avoid conflicts. CONCORDIA therefore aims to foster a culture in which a trustful exchange between parents, schoolteachers and educators/social workers takes place where the goal is not only for a child to graduate from school but to be directed to the full potential, and develop full personality and promoting of children’s well-being.

We assume that every child comes to school with a wealth of experience, knowledge and skills, but also with very individual life and development needs. We understand school as a cultural centre and as a meeting place for all who want to educate themselves, a place where an exchange of experiences between generations is possible.

Priority 3: Remedial education

One key instrument to support the way out of intergenerational poverty and uplift children and youth from disadvantaged communities is through remedial education. The remedial education activities in CONCORDIA Day Centres provide extra assistance to students who, due to various reasons, have fallen behind the rest of the class in areas such as literacy or mathematics. CONCORDIA educators work closely with local school teachers, who apply appropriate teaching methods to fulfil their student's requirements. Although these children have low academic achievement, they are not necessarily limited in their cognitive or intellectual skills. Some children may struggle to organise their thoughts or comprehend abstract ideas and concepts. Some students may have poor memory, low motivation, a short attention span in strict school environment, or other behavioural issues. Above all, previous failures have taught them to have low expectations of themselves and, because of their inability to succeed in school, they have lowered their aspirations for themselves. These students' interest in learning is being awakened again with effective remedial assistance, the use of stimulating instructional tactics, closer monitoring, and more individual attention. Together with the psychosocial and economic support provided by CONCORDIA to children and their families, participants can focus on their learning journey and on improving their academic progress.

Priority 4: Vocational education & Job coaching

With its work, CONCORDIA creates bridges of cooperation between the education system and the social service system and provides them with examples of tailor-made paths of education and professional training for learners coming from disadvantaged families and communities, some of whom have missed years of formal education. Young people who have been in care, represent a highly vulnerable category vastly exposed to live in poverty and social exclusion. Lacking family support and without the skills for socio-professional integration, these groups of people do not benefit from social services, counselling and assistance and at the same time face problems related to functional illiteracy and educational retardation, disabilities, inequity (including gender inequality), lack of skills, including basic knowledge of foreign languages and digital skills. Due to the public vocational education system, focused on theoretical training, graduates often do not have the practical skills needed for the job, which is often seen as a disadvantage by employers.

Our educational model includes social, emotional and school intervention in working with young people, practical learning of a profession, counselling to gain access to the labour market and support to find a home. Thus, vocational education in CONCORDIA is complemented by educational concepts such as **School for Life** (learning basic life skills by applying one's experiences and needs), **Case Management** (individual intervention which provides regular monitoring and intensive advising to all students, addressing their academic and non-academic needs and concerns), **Job Coaching** (employment support and mentoring while setting into the new role, guidance on budgeting, debt management, housing, etc.) and **Empowerment** activities.

Priority 5: School for Life: unlocking the door of independent living

Literacy competencies are key, but far not enough for progress and long-term success. Starting with the basic skills such as how to manage own household (cooking, shopping, laundry, self-care, personal hygiene and budgeting) and further focusing on problem-solving, critical thinking, ability to cooperate, creativity and actively participating in society are essential as young people move into adulthood and indispensable in our quickly changing society. A large proportion of young people with vulnerable backgrounds, such as young care leavers, exit their settings lacking safety nets or supporting community networks, poorly prepared for living independently. Without having someone to assist and guide them with their next steps, they may not have the confidence to manage their everyday life effectively and run a high risk of feeling excluded from society and developing social and behavioural challenges.

CONCORDIA's "School for Life" approach helps young people in their process of transitioning, assisting them to develop lifelong reasoning, thinking, analysing, personal care, and interpersonal skills. This includes self-awareness, problem-solving, learning to negotiate, decision-making, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, conflict resolution, empathy, coping with emotions, stress management, money management, raising a family, and running a home. The approach aims to empower and guide young people and young care leavers to be competent and to step confidently into independent and healthy adult lives. The methodologies are interactive and innovative and result in basic guidance for the near future, helping the participants to improve their resilience, develop coping strategies and fight stigma and discrimination.

Priority 6: Increased capacity at a systemic level – CONCORDIA Academia

CONCORDIA, in addition to its continuous efforts to provide social services to vulnerable individuals and communities, defining its target group, increases its impact by addressing a systemic intervention. Developing the capacity of individuals and organisations serving as caregivers, using education as a generic tool, CONCORDIA not only assures the quality of its social intervention as such, but it also preserves the deontological approach and significantly reduces the risk of social services consumption in the long run. Through professionalisation of the human resources in the social field, the intervention becomes durable, as it doesn't address the punctual effect, but mainly the long-lasting cause of vulnerability. Additionally, the investment made in the staff might be valued by keeping the practitioners healthy, well-balanced and well-trained, not deeply affected and incapacitated by exhaustion or emotional burnout. Also, the labour force fluctuation might be reduced.



CONCORDIA Academia is a regional centre for education and innovative practices in the social field, providing highly qualitative, customised training programmes to professionals and private and public organisations acting in the social field. The philosophy of learning promoted by Academia defines the professional from 4 different perspectives: (1) technical skills/expertise, objectified through the professional's tools and competencies in fulfilling their duties, (2) soft skills, translated into the quality of the relationships built by the professional, when directly working with programme participants, (3) self-care, as a constant concern oriented to maintain the self-balance capacity at individual level, when working with severe cases and staying in contact with suffering on daily bases, (4) organisational perspective, which translates the organisational culture oriented in promoting a healthy self-care culture.

To provide proper social intervention, the system needs good, well-trained and supported professionals. Because people need people.

CONCORDIA Academia strengthens the organisational effort to train resilience, to be innovative and to continuously scan the horizon, exploring the tendencies and addressing the challenges of a highly dynamic context of needs. Identifying the key competencies in the next decade and ways to develop them at both individual and organisational levels, Academia proves that CONCORDIA invests professionals as key players in conducting social intervention.

Cross-cutting issue: Advocacy and Education on Children's Rights and Child Protection

Systematic barriers within education prevent the most vulnerable children from accessing some of their basic human rights: education and non-discrimination. We are aware that the reasons for the discrimination, segregation and exclusion are innumerable, complex, and depending on the context. CONCORDIA sees its role not only as a service provider which provides educational and social services to communities in need but also takes a rights-based approach to support civil societies in our partner countries in claiming their right to education. This also includes enabling rights holders themselves (these may be children, youth, parents, communities, etc.) to advocate for education. Education on human rights and citizen rights means that people are aware of and able to articulate their rights so that they can demand and realise them and are supported to become independent and engaged citizens. In CONCORDIA, we see this as a lifelong process which contributes to the empowerment of our programme participants.

Advocacy in education has the key task of drawing attention to what stands in the way of the right to education and advocating for additional funding. Together with other stakeholders, our advocacy contributes to a structural and systemic change to ensure that vulnerable children, e.g. such as girls and Romn*ja children, are enrolled in school and receive a quality education.

Advocacy for education demands that all educational programmes for all people are

- freely available and viable,
- free, compulsory, inclusive and discrimination-free,
- relevant, culturally appropriate and of high quality, as well as
- specifically adequate catering to needs and contexts.

Education in emergencies

CONCORDIA acknowledges the protective role that education plays in the context of emergencies: Education contributes to the overall well-being of children and youth, it enforces gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, and by providing hope, stability and predictability it contributes to the physical, psychosocial and cognitive protection of children and youth. Access to education in emergencies means access to an essential service which can also contribute to peacebuilding and conflict-resolution efforts.

In CONCORDIA, schools and other educational settings provide a safe space not only for protection but also for psychosocial activities, a place for warm meals, health support and space for leisure and play. CONCORDIA encourages the placement of refugee children in national education systems and, where this is not possible, supports their learning needs through the facilitation of online learning, language courses, supervised online learning, etc. CONCORDIA also supports the capacity building of teachers and other caregivers to support children's and youth's continuous learning.



**There's no such thing as neutral education.
Education either functions as an instrument
to bring about conformity or freedom. - Paulo Freire**



Footnotes

¹ According to the definition Generational Poverty is defined as a family having lived in poverty for at least two generations.

² For statistical purposes CONCORDIA defines as youth persons between the ages of 18 – 24 and young adults between ages of 25 – 35.

³ Convention on the Rights of the Child:

www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

⁴ CONCORDIA Spirit & Values 2022.

concordiaromania.sharepoint.com/sites/one-ATDE/Shared%20Documents/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2Fsites%2Fone%2DATDE%2FShared%20Documents%2FAT%20DE%2FSpirit%20and%20values%2Fspirit%5Fvalue%5Ffinal%20english%2Epdf&parent=%2Fsites%2Fone%2DATDE%2FShared%20Documents%2FAT%20DE%2FSpirit%20and%20values

⁵ CONCORDIA Child Protection Policy:

www.concordia.or.at/en/how-concordia-helps/child-protection/concordia-child-protection-policy/

⁶ KCS: <https://www.keepingchildrensafe.global/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/KCS-CS-Standards-ENG-200218.pdf>

⁷ EU Key competences for lifelong learning: www.fi.uu.nl/publicaties/literatuur/2018_eu_key_competences.pdf

⁸ SOS Children Villages Report Bulgaria: www.sos-childrensvillages.org/where-we-help/europe/bulgaria

⁹ UNICEF Annual report Kosovo: www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/reports/annual-report-2021

¹⁰ UNDP Moldova: www.undp.org/moldova/press-releases/undp-scales-support-moldova-early-projections-suggest-thousands-could-be-pushed-poverty-protracted-war

¹¹ “You Cannot Replace a Person”: An MPF Project Gives Voice to Children Staying Behind in Moldova and Ukraine: www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/news/you-cannot-replace-a-person-an-mpf-project-gives-voice-to-children-staying-behind-in-moldova-and-ukraine

¹² PEARMA Teach - evidence-based interventions and methods from Positive Psychology: padlet.com/ingridteufel/permanent-aufbl-hen-ja-das-k-nnen-wir-becv6gppgol6n9im/wish/2136830590

¹³ Convention on the Rights of the Child: www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

¹⁴ www.concordia.or.at/en/how-concordia-helps/education/concordia-primary-school/

