

Azerbaijan

Part 1: Situation update in the country

Azerbaijan recorded continued progress for children in a number of significant areas, with the development of new policies, programmes and legislation in support of equitable child development.

Azerbaijan's child mortality figures were revised during the year, following a review of the national data collection systems by a joint mission from the UN Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (IGME), with the rates of neonatal, infant and under-five deaths per 1,000 live births now reported at 11.8, 20.5 and 23, respectively. The level of under-five mortality has shown a consistent decline since 2005 and the revised estimate now means that Azerbaijan has met the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of bringing under-five mortality rates to no more than 25 deaths per 1,000 live births. A National Action Plan on reduction of child mortality and a National Action Plan on Early Prevention and Treatment of Childhood Disabilities began to be implemented during the year. Immediate results included the establishment of a real-time register of women who were pregnant, provision of essential equipment and medicines to regional perinatal centres providing tertiary level perinatal care and resuscitation for premature newborns, and the organization of distance medical consultations by centrally-based health professionals. In addition, every neonatal death is investigated by a Ministry of Health commission at local level.

Azerbaijan's school readiness programme, which provides one-year of preschool learning for five year olds, now reaches 75 per cent of the relevant age child population. The Ministry of Education has declared its intention to increase enrolment to 90 per cent by 2020. There was a continued expansion of the new community-based preschool education programme for children aged 3-4 years, which during the year reached more than 1,000 additional children in 50 under-served communities in 10 regions of the country. During the year, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the Regulations for Organizing Preschool Education in short-term family-type/community-based Learning Groups, which establish procedures and processes for organizing preschool education in such settings. This aims to facilitate access to preschool education for all children aged 1-5 years through alternative and low-cost modalities.

According to official statistics, following the implementation of the State Programme on Deinstitutionalization and Alternative Care, there were 3,132 children living in residential institutions.

A new study - the International Men and Gender Equality Survey - jointly undertaken in three regions of the country by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Azerbaijan State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs found that 32.5 per cent of men reported perpetrating and 32.1 per cent of women experienced, physical violence. The most common type of intimate partner violence reported was psychological violence: more than 73 per cent of men reported having ever psychologically abused a partner. The last study on violence against children, covering violence in Azerbaijan's schools, state childcare institutions and facilities for children in conflict with the law, was conducted in 2009 and there is no current data on violence against children publicly available. Moreover, most cases are not registered. A

module on violence against children will be included in a planned Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) to be conducted in 2021.

A UNICEF-supported knowledge, attitudes and practices survey on children with disabilities found that understanding of disability remained weak at all levels of Azerbaijan's society, and that there is limited knowledge amongst the public of legislation and policies designed to support children with disabilities. While overall attitudes towards children with disabilities were found to be positive, practices do not always match these attitudes. For example, not all children with disabilities were registered, reducing the potential for children to receive formal State support, while bullying was reported as a significant threat to children with disabilities. About 84 per cent of teachers reported that they have received little or no training on teaching children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, either through pre- or in-service training. However, there is strong support amongst parents of children with disabilities for inclusive education.

In May, a National Action Plan on Early Prevention and Treatment of Childhood Disabilities was approved by Presidential Decree. It aims to reduce the prevalence and severity of disabilities among children through early detection of risk factors and diseases at antenatal, post-natal and later stages of childhood. The main focus of the Plan is on early detection, screening programmes, prevention of disability through reduced exposure to risk factors particularly amongst pregnant women, increasing awareness and parenting education, along with strengthening system capacity to meet the needs of children with disabilities.

Azerbaijan also adopted a new Law on the Rights of People with Disabilities during the year. The Law provides a legal basis for eliminating discrimination on the basis of disability, promotes social inclusion and the involvement of people with disabilities in decision-making processes related to their lives, and underscores the rights and freedoms of persons with disabilities on the basis of equal opportunity.

The Government sustained reforms in the justice sector to ensure the implementation of comprehensive institutional, legislative and practical measures in criminal law policy. They established the Probation Service under the Ministry of Justice, restricted the use of arrest and imprisonment for offences not causing danger to the public or for less serious crimes, decriminalized certain existing crimes, as well as applied information and communication technologies. Recent changes in the Criminal Code promote increased use of alternative, non-custodial measures instead of deprivation of liberty, decreasing the length of sanctions for certain crimes and introducing a new sanction, the restriction of freedom through electronic monitoring).

One other child-focused legislative development in 2018 was the adoption of a law on Protection of Children from Harmful Information. This aims to enable distribution of information to children which is not harmful to them, prohibits communication of information which encourages violence, vandalism, drug and alcohol abuse, pornography and anti-social behaviours, and strives to prevent crimes against children committed through the use of information technology.

A baseline survey on the situation of youth aged 10-29 years in six districts, finalized between UNICEF and the Ministry of Youth and Sports in 2018, found that only 54 per cent of respondents felt that their opinion as a young person was valued in their communities. Young people also reported that they did not use some of the main state-managed facilities provided

for youth and adolescents at district level. Young people responding to the survey also felt that many youth initiatives are based on what the authorities have to offer rather than what youth themselves want or need. For this reason, one recommendation from the survey was to offer what adolescents and youth identify as their interests - sports and arts in this case - and their needs, which were good health and job opportunities.

New state institutions were established or expanded during the year, providing opportunities for further focus on child development. In January, the Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency began operations. It has responsibilities for the development of legislation and standards related to food safety and quality, certification of producers, quality control of food products, and inspection and management of food safety, amongst others. The Agency will provide a critical role in supporting potential mandatory flour fortification with iron supplements, widely considered to be vital to reducing rates of iron-deficiency anaemia amongst women in the country. Meanwhile, the State Agency on Mandatory Health Insurance, which started pilot operations in two districts in 2017, expanded its work to a third district in 2018. It has shown significant interest in ensuring that the new mandatory health insurance programme, scheduled to be rolled-out nationally from 2020, adequately covers essential child health and nutrition interventions with a high level of quality.

In December, the Government submitted its latest report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which will be reviewed in 2019. At the request of the Government, UNICEF provided international technical expertise to support 16 government staff responsible for drafting the State Report. The expert also reviewed the draft report prior to its submission in December to verify information provided.

Progress for children took place against a generally stable economic background. The annual State budget was revised during the year to reflect increased estimates for total revenue; around US\$1.3 billion above initial projections. However, despite these anticipated increases, the State budget was expected to remain in deficit for the year. The economy expanded slightly during the year, with projections for continued growth in Gross Domestic Product over the next four years. Inflation fell to 2.7 per cent, compared to nearly 14 per cent in 2017.

The economic situation provided a solid backdrop for a national focus on the Sustainable Development Agenda, to which Azerbaijan has made a strong commitment. In July, an SDG Localization and Prioritization Workshop was undertaken involving key government bodies and United Nations (UN) agencies. The workshop built on the 2017 Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support (MAPS) initiative, and established working groups to refine prioritization of SDGs against identified challenges, opportunities and constraints in the country. Subsequently, the Baku Forum on Sustainable Development took place in the last quarter of the year, dedicated to strengthening the regional partnership on implementation of the SDGs.

Part 2: Major Results including in humanitarian action and gender, against the results in the Country Programme Documents

The year under review represents the third year of the current UNICEF Azerbaijan Country Programme of Cooperation. A Mid-Term Review of the Country Programme was conducted with all implementing partners in the first quarter. It resulted in five reconfirmed and refined key focus areas: early childhood development, inclusive education, community-based social services for children, adolescent and youth development and participation, and evidence-based

child rights monitoring. In 2018, UNICEF continued its support to these areas, aligned to national development priorities and the five goal areas of the new UNICEF global Strategic Plan for 2018-2021.

The year also marked 25 years of UNICEF's partnership with Azerbaijan. It was commemorated through a wide range of public events and media engagements, including a special concert by a national children's orchestra, dedicated television documentaries on UNICEF's work, and the issuing of a special postage stamp. These all presented the opportunity to reflect on progress for children over a quarter of a century while highlighting areas for which continued commitments to child development were needed.

Goal area 1: Every child survives and thrives

With UNICEF support, a team of senior experts from the UN Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation analyzed existing systems in Azerbaijan for registration and reporting of child mortality. The team acknowledged improvements in the civil registration and vital statistics system in Azerbaijan, which is now providing more accurate birth registration through a digital database at the Ministry of Justice. However, the team also noted that accurate recording of deaths still faces challenges, relying on a paper-based system. Subsequent to its visit, the mission recommended the adjustment of the under-five child mortality estimate for Azerbaijan from a preliminary estimation of 29.7 per 1,000 live births to 23 per 1,000 live births.

With UNICEF's technical and financial support, a large-scale communication campaign to promote exclusive breastfeeding and optimal infant and young child feeding practices for early prevention of the double burden of malnutrition (both undernutrition and obesity) continued. During National Breastfeeding Week in October, key messages on breastfeeding were disseminated, including through health workers in child polyclinics and maternity hospitals, public service announcements, posters and flyers distributed through health facilities and Azerbaijan Service and Assessment Network (ASAN) service centres nationwide. Banners and billboards were placed in subway stations in Baku, reaching a potential audience of 500,000 people. Social media messaging and mass media communication events also helped to connect experts with mothers to support breastfeeding promotion.

The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative in Azerbaijan began to be revitalized, with updated guidelines produced by UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), the establishment of a dedicated working group within the Ministry of Health and a new partnership established with the Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency.

Following the drafting of a law on mandatory flour fortification, UNICEF supported a cost-benefit analysis to project estimated costs over a 10-year implementation period. Detailed discussions with other key partners under the auspices of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister led to commitments from government agencies to improve further the draft law and officially submit it to the Cabinet of Ministers for further circulation and submission to the Parliament early in 2019. Significantly, the Ministry of Finance indicated a commitment to include costs of establishing national flour fortification in future State budgets.

The Early Detection and Early Intervention Initiative for children with disabilities (EDEPI) continued, with the number of families seeking referral services for early intervention up by 31 per cent from 2015. This indicates a likely increase in identified cases of early development delays and disabilities. In 2018, most of the 14 referral centres established by the Ministry of

Health to support EDEPI around the country started operations, although the scope and quality of services are yet to be standardized. To enhance quality, UNICEF supported further implementation of training programmes and certification of seven new national master trainers. One of these trainers was also recognized as an international trainer and subsequently provided support on growth monitoring of child development to health professionals in Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. More than 600 Azerbaijani paediatricians, child neurologists and other professionals working at primary health care level have received training to enhance their knowledge and skills in growth monitoring of child development.

UNICEF facilitated learning and knowledge exchanges between Azerbaijan and other countries on maternal and child health. Health professionals from Azerbaijan participated in the Regional Conference for Europe and Central Asia titled "Early Childhood Intervention: Strengthening Systems and Empowering Families" organized by the Government of Belarus, UNICEF Belarus and the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia. Participants gained knowledge of models of early intervention services across the region. A fact-finding mission was supported by UNICEF Croatia to enable Azerbaijani health officials to gain an understanding of successful models of early intervention services and programmes implemented in the country.

A new partnership between UNICEF and the State Agency on Mandatory Health Insurance (SAMHI) was developed in 2018. UNICEF engaged a technical expert to work with the Agency in identifying where high impact maternal and child health services could be included in the service packages of the health insurance system. Further cooperation with the SAMHI is expected in 2019 in areas of policy development and health service capacity building, as the Agency demonstrates an increased role in public health reform in the country.

Goal area 2: Every child learns

The one-year preschool attendance rate for five year old children increased from 14.2 per cent in the 2014 school year to 75 per cent in 2018, through an ongoing programme supported by UNICEF. An in-service teacher training programme for more than 4,600 teachers from 61 regions contributed to the programme reaching some 103,000 children during the year.

Building on the recommendations of the UNICEF-supported Analytical Review of Governance, Provision and Quality of Early Childhood Education Services at the Local Level in Countries of CEE/CIS - Azerbaijan Country Report, quality assurance guidelines were developed by the Institute of Education under the Ministry of Education, and tested to ensure effectiveness, quality and consistency in content, teaching, assessment and learning environment. In addition, 10 e-learning courses were developed for continuous professional development of teachers, guiding them through various aspects of early childhood education, including key development milestones, child behaviour, learning environment and engaging parents in early childhood development.

A non-formal community-based early learning programme supported by UNICEF continued to be implemented in 50 early learning centres. In total, early learning initiatives including those supported by UNICEF reach about 3,000 children aged 3-4 years. A training module on developmental needs of children was designed and the capacity of teachers, parents and community leaders was enhanced. Minimum standards for early learning centres, such as infrastructure, learning environment, management, operations, learning resources, management of the centre, roles and responsibilities of the key actors, budgeting and other issues related to the work of the centres were established. All teachers received professional

training and mentoring support in early child learning, play, active learning methodologies, communication with children and community mobilization. The Ministry of Education is reviewing preschool education curriculum and standards for future adjustments to ensure inclusion of children with disabilities in both formal and non-formal preschool settings.

UNICEF provided full support to the implementation of the State Programme on Inclusive Education endorsed by the President in December 2017. Building on the existing pilot underway since 2015, a more comprehensive approach towards inclusive education was developed and implemented, in a partnership between UNICEF, the Ministry of Education and the European Union. UNICEF has responsibility for coordinating efforts in development of a teacher education package for pre- and in-service teacher training in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and the Regional Development Public Union non-government organization with the support of the European Union. This will contribute to improved learning opportunities for both children with and without disabilities. The national systems of pre- and in-service teacher training were reviewed and a national capacity-building strategy for inclusive education drafted. Comprehensive training programmes on inclusive education for pre-service and in-service training of general education and special education teachers were developed and will be introduced in seven selected districts in 2019. Nine resource centres are in the process of being established in regular schools. These new establishments are intended to provide schools, teachers and parents in pilot districts with professional support and multiple resources to support inclusive teaching and learning practices in regular schools.

While the new approach was under development, the existing pilot modules for inclusive education undertaken in four Baku schools continued to support children with intellectual disabilities. During the year, 52 children with intellectual disabilities were engaged in regular classes and received education in an inclusive setting. A case study commenced to assess and document the inclusive school modelling experience, and capture good practices and lessons learned. The findings will contribute the full implementation of the State Programme on Inclusive Education and scale-up inclusive education to reach more children.

In support of the inclusive education programme, a study on knowledge, attitude and practices towards children with disabilities was finalized in 2018, identifying various challenges and bottlenecks to inclusive education. The study found that significant barriers remain towards inclusion of children with disabilities in society, with understanding of disability as a concept generally weak at all levels. There is a strong degree of confusion between disability and health conditions; with understanding of disability often limited to that of a medical problem. It also found that few people are aware of legislation and policies supporting children with disabilities. The attitude to education of children with disabilities was found to be mixed between agreement that children with disabilities have the right to study in mainstream schools and a belief that special schools are a better option. All parents of children with disabilities in both mainstream and special schools interviewed as part of the pilot programme case study wanted their children to attend mainstream schools in age appropriate classes. Based on these findings, a comprehensive communication for social change strategy is under development to guide future efforts in increasing public awareness on the rights of children with disabilities, addressing stigma and discrimination towards children with disabilities and building a more supportive environment for inclusive education.

Goal area 3: Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

UNICEF and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population launched a pilot

initiative for integrated social services in two districts in 2018 (Aghjabadi and Shirvan), to test implementation, review results and make necessary adjustments to the draft Child-Centred and Equity-focused Social Service Strategy developed in 2017. The initiative establishes an integrated approach to social services and child protection, based on the application of professional and quality social work for vulnerable children and families. This is through developing a social services workforce, establishing minimum standards of social services for children, and strengthening local coordination and referral systems. As such, the initiative is a key step towards a fully comprehensive approach to child protection. It is a significant development towards an integrated package of support for vulnerable children and families - including families living below the poverty line, single-parent families, children with disabilities, children deprived of parental care, victims of violence and children in conflict with the law - that brings together different actors. One of the key aims of the pilot initiative is to build a strong coordination mechanism and capacity at district level to protect children from violence and respond to cases of violence with the support of multidisciplinary teams, involving social workers, psychologists, lawyers, and educators. More than 240 children benefited directly from this initiative in the two districts between September and November 2018. UNICEF also engaged professional social workers to provide preventive support to 156 children in the two districts of Gazakh and Agstafa.

UNICEF provided technical support for building capacity among practitioners performing social work tasks at the local branches of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population. Building on the introductory course on basics of social work introduced in 2017, UNICEF supported the Ministry in provision of an in-depth training module on social work case management, with 110 of their staff at local level receiving training on case management. The training involved how to undertake initial and core assessments, interviewing skills and other knowledge and practical skills to improve the child-focused approach to case management. This focus aligns with the overall objective of establishing a “ladder” structure of professional social workers, para-professional social workers and community social service workforce that will be better placed to support an integrated and community-based social service system for children.

A series of quality standards on social services for children with developmental delays and disabilities and for children in conflict and contact with the law were drafted as part of the minimum package of social services for children. These standards were applied in the services centres of the two pilot districts by 24 UNICEF-trained social service workers in national non-governmental providers. More than 240 children benefited directly from this initiative in the two districts between September and November 2018. Through the pilot, these standards and guidelines will be further improved and adapted as national standards for wider application.

The focus on the importance of an integrated approach to child protection, and in particular the need for different partners to align efforts to support children at risk, led to the establishment of coordination groups in the two pilot districts. With UNICEF's support, members of these groups, which included representatives of the local authorities working in education, social protection, health, youth and law enforcement, were trained on the concepts of social work in child protection and referral systems. The establishment of the local coordination groups significantly changed the approach towards working on children's issues with members also receiving routine support from UNICEF on issues regarding international standards and developing holistic approaches to the needs of vulnerable children.

UNICEF continued to support the promotion of the rights of children with disabilities and

especially advocacy for a shift in understanding of disability away from a purely medical issue to a more social approach. A technical workshop was held during the year to focus on the introduction and clarification of the social approach to disability, with participants from key Ministries, academia and non-government organization partners. The workshop identified key areas for collaboration and an agreement on how to strengthen cross-sectoral coordination of a national shared database for children with disabilities in 2019.

UNICEF supported the expansion of specialized juvenile justice teams, including judges, prosecutors, police officers and lawyers, across the country. This was based on recommendations made by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which noted the lack of law enforcement personnel specialized in child-related investigations and interrogation of children in conflict with the law, and the need for training of all relevant law enforcement professionals in these areas as well as child-friendly approaches in judicial proceedings. Following the successful piloting initiative in the Baku City Court of Grave Crimes, similar teams were developed in Ganja, Sheki and Lenkaran cities. These programmes focused on the concepts of “best interests of a child”, prevention of delinquency, diversion, protection of victims and witnesses, non-custodial measures, and child-friendly approaches in judicial proceedings. A total of 35 justice professionals were trained and certified in dealing with child offenders and victims in the three districts.

Goal area 4: Every child lives in a safe and clean environment

Sustainable support to improved water, sanitation and hygiene in schools resulted in improved knowledge amongst over 22,000 pupils through life skills-based hygiene education and child participation initiatives. A programme co-funded by UNICEF, the Wilo Foundation and local communities saw more than 5,200 children benefit from improved water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in schools, in some cases leading directly to increased school attendance. Standards on water, sanitation and hygiene in schools were improved and a training programme and assessment guidelines made available for schools to ensure quality hygiene education. Based on a curriculum review and related recommendations, curriculum standards on hygiene education were designed, including learning outcomes, a teachers' manual and assessment tools to measure progress.

UNICEF provided technical support to the Ministry of Education to develop an environmental education programme for teachers as part of extra-curricular activities to expand children's knowledge and understanding of the environment, climate change challenges and solutions. The initiative reached more than 100 teachers and 3,000 school children in selected regions of Azerbaijan through capacity building and awareness-raising activities. The training programme will now be used by all extra-curricular institutions under the Ministry of Education on a regular basis.

Goal area 5: Every child has an equitable chance in life

In 2018, UNICEF developed a strong partnership with Azerbaijan's National Coordination Council on Sustainable Development through engagement on child development issues with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister who chairs the Council. This engagement builds on UNICEF's support to the Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support initiative which resulted in two key areas for children - early childhood development and strengthened social protection - being proposed as accelerators for national development.

A National Children's Strategy is under review by the Cabinet of Ministers and is expected to be approved in early 2019. UNICEF secured agreement with its main Government partners to support the development of a National Plan of Action for Children to operationalize the Strategy in support of the national Sustainable Development Agenda. This would include the establishment of critical targets for the most vulnerable children in that National Agenda.

While Azerbaijan has not developed an exclusive child poverty measurement, the support of UNICEF enabled further analysis of data collected by the State Statistics Committee through two Child Deprivation Studies in 2015 and 2017. These provided insights to the impact of the 2015 financial crisis on children and at-risk of poverty rates. The report is being finalized and key findings are expected to be used to support the Government in developing social protection policies and strategies that will mitigate and build resilience against future economic shocks to the most vulnerable population. UNICEF also reached an initial agreement with the State Statistics Committee and the National Coordination Council on Sustainable Development for the introduction of multi-dimensional child poverty measurement in the coming two years.

The data generation function of the National Child Databank within the State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs continued to be improved through linking and synchronizing the databank with other sectoral databases via the establishment of data transfer systems. Key staff of the relevant partners, including local executive authorities, benefited from increased knowledge and skills on using the databank through a series of UNICEF-supported workshops. A previous challenge of obtaining all child data from the relevant government authorities resulting from the unavailability of unique identifiers remains unresolved, due to other priorities facing government partners. However, the national child databank, when completed, will allow more disaggregation of child development indicators based on their geographic locations gender, age and other social variables, support better identification of vulnerability and enhance policymaking and programming for children.

A new module of data collection on children with disabilities, the UNICEF/ Washington Group on Disability Statistics Module on Child Functioning, was introduced and tested through integration into the national Household Budget Survey, covering over 7,000 children. This made Azerbaijan the first country in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia Region to implement this module. The preliminary data analysis found extremely low prevalence of different functioning difficulties among children, indicating a possible need for further review and adaption of the methodology to the local context.

UNICEF continued to support the National Preventative Group under the Office of the Ombudsperson to improve its capacity to identify better and prevent child rights violations at the national level. During 2018, the Group members undertook monitoring in 48 child care institutions, including detention centres. Around 100 children were able to confidentially report concerns over their care or wellbeing, such as improving detention and residential conditions, the quality of health and education services, and organization of leisure time. These were subsequently followed up by the Group with relevant agencies. In the case of reported concerns, the Group members document them and undertake investigations, and raise concerns with the head of institution and to the coordinating entity when necessary. According to the Group members, this approach helps to address most of the concerns and yields positive outcomes.

The National Preventative Group Management Information System was also upgraded after a one-year testing period. Currently, all monitoring visits, hotline calls and complaints by children

are managed through the Management Information System, and in 2018 the cases of more than 300 children were recorded and managed.

Azerbaijan has developed a comprehensive social protection system through Target Social Assistance programmes. However, it is acknowledged that social insurance - mainly pensions - and cash-based social assistance are more advanced than social services provision. UNICEF's continued support to the development of the draft Social Service Strategy for Children and the piloting of an integrated social services project in two districts (outlined earlier) has created an important opportunity to supplement social protection interventions such as cash transfers with quality social services for the most vulnerable children and families at local level.

Building greater social inclusion was also at the heart of UNICEF's work with youth and adolescents throughout 2018. The UN Youth Advisory Council, a group of 11 young men and women from diverse backgrounds, continued to play an important role as advisers on youth issues to UNICEF and the broader UN Country Team. They worked as peer facilitators on SDGs and volunteerism with other young people, monitored the 2017-2021 State Youth Programme through online and face-to-face consultations with young people, supported data dissemination for UNICEF's Youth and Adolescence Baseline Survey and participated in the Country Programme Mid-term Review process with the Government.

Youth engagement was also central to UNICEF's continued support to the Azerbaijan Youth Advocacy Programme. Through this, 60 boy and girl members, aged 11-18 years, developed new skills and knowledge in leadership, project management, digital media, communication, presentation-making, disaster risk reduction and mine risk education. The young people became actively engaged in peer education at their schools and involved in local decision-making with district authorities to promote youth voices in the planning and implementation of three small scale joint projects with the respective authorities. These were a Youth Book House in Barda, a sports playground in Goranboy and a 3D cinema in Tartar, that benefitted 2,200 adolescents in these districts. In addition, 200 adolescents from five schools were trained on mine safety and digital media through peer education sessions conducted by Programme members. On Universal Children's Day, Programme members took over the UNICEF Azerbaijan social media page, posting videos of interviews they had undertaken with their district authority leaders. The enhanced confidence and leadership abilities of the Programme members were also demonstrated through four young people securing grants from the National Youth Foundation to support their own projects on vocational training, mine and internet safety and girls' participation in sport.

UNICEF, as lead agency in a joint UN-Government initiative, supported the ongoing transformation of the national network of Youth Houses to deliver more integrated youth services. More than 1,200 young people benefited from basic life skills, knowledge on SDGs, volunteerism, reproductive health education, prevention of gender-based violence, and psychological and legal counselling in the two pilot Youth Houses in 2018. Other UN partners involved included the Office of the UN Resident Coordinator, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNFPA, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Volunteers and the UN Youth Advisory Council. The integrated youth services being piloted are expected to be expanded to other Youth Houses through both UNICEF and the Government in the coming two years.

UNICEF supported the design of a Basic Life Skills course that was tested in 2018 with just over 200 young people aged 12-24 years. The course was further enhanced as result of testing

and feedback from young people in the two pilot Youth House and from the Girls Empowerment Academy of the Association of Football Federations of Azerbaijan (AFFA).

A national platform for the preparation of youth workers was launched in 2018 with the first Masters' degree academic programme for youth work managers. The programme adapts best practices from Estonia, Finland, Malta and the United Kingdom. It was designed with international experts and support from the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Education and the Academy of Public Administration under the President. Six higher education institutions agreed to implement the programme from September 2019. Draft occupational standards were also prepared for national review and will be managed through a State-led online consultation platform in early 2019. A memorandum of understanding was signed between the Academy of Public Administration, Tallinn University in Estonia and UNICEF, formulating a South-South cooperation mechanism to further support professional exchanges between Azerbaijan and Estonia.

Cross-cutting initiatives in 2018

At the request of the Government, UNICEF provided international technical expertise to support 16 government staff responsible for drafting the State Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The expert also reviewed the draft report, prior to its submission in December, to verify information provided.

In 2018, a new partnership was developed between UNICEF and the ASAN Volunteer Organization in the State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovation under the President to help promote child rights and provide information to families on children's issues. A five-day training programme facilitated by an international expert on interactive child rights promotion resulted in 20 young people certified as Master Trainers on Child Rights. Subsequently, 100 ASAN Volunteers (71 girls and 29 boys) received training through the Master Trainers and will now organize Child Rights Days in ASAN Service Centres, which are government information, advice and service points in the districts, starting in early 2019.

Azerbaijan continued to face challenges in gender inequity, as demonstrated by a significant imbalance in the sex ratio at birth, gender-based violence as reported in a new study by UNFPA and the State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs, and obstacles to the labour market as shown in a UNDP study in 2018. UNICEF continued its work to promote positive images of women and girls in society to counter this narrative, and in partnership with the Association of Football Federations of Azerbaijan and the Government of the Netherlands, a #GirlsCan campaign was launched in 2018 reaching more than 260,000 people via social media. A Youth Forum was also organized featuring four prominent and successful Azerbaijani girls and young women to promote gender equality and inspire more girls to demonstrate their individual skills and talents.

Two girls' football teams were established with the support of AFFA through the Binagadi and Mingachevir Youth Houses as part of the Joint Government-UN Youth Houses Initiative. A total of 40 girls enrolled, including migrant children, children of internally displaced families and those from low-income families.

Sport for development and communication for development and social change remained key approaches supported by UNICEF to enable inclusion of children with disabilities in community activities. Through UNICEF's ongoing support to the National Paralympic Committee in

organizing the 4th National Children's Paralympic Games, 190 children and adolescents with disabilities, including the first international team of 11 boys and girls from Georgia, participated in seven sports. In addition to the social inclusion of the young athletes, the initiative also helps to tackle negative stereotypes and stigma associated with disability in Azerbaijan. A series of social media videos stories was also produced by the UNICEF communication team, featuring parents of children with disabilities who supported their children in the Paralympic Games as champions of social inclusion. The social media videos reached more than 180,000 people.

UNICEF embarked on two initiatives capitalizing on a new partnership with UN Volunteers. Two UNICEF Youth Advocates, supported by UN Volunteers, joined the team to help develop private sector engagement on child rights and innovation for children respectively. During the year, guidance was developed to help local businesses promote child rights through their workplace environment, policies and practices and an initial mapping of current private sector approaches to child rights commenced. This will enable targeted engagement with private sector entities starting from 2019 to promote child-friendly business approaches, in a country where the private sector continues to expand. The UN Volunteer for Technology, Innovation and Youth worked throughout the second half of the year to identify possible technological solutions to address the needs of vulnerable children, and an action plan on geo-fencing was developed in support of improved targeting of communication for behavioural change amongst mothers regarding exclusive breastfeeding. The UN Volunteer also tested several mobile applications to support improve communication and life skills amongst children with disabilities.

Part 3: Lessons learned and constraints

A repeated element of UNICEF-supported advocacy for children during 2018 was a focus by government partners on understanding the full costs of implementing proposed initiatives in support of child development. Examples included the mandatory flour fortification and the development of a National Plan of Action for Children and the SDGs. In an economic context where efforts continue to balance the national budget and one of the recognized risks to development is potential revenue fluctuations linked to oil prices, it is understandable that investment in child development should be linked to a clear fiscal framework. For this reason, UNICEF prioritized the cost-benefit analysis associated with its advocacy for mandatory flour fortification, resulting in positive engagement among government partners. Similar analyses should be undertaken for future advocacy priorities, not least for those requiring increased public expenditure to bring realisation. Looking ahead, when feasible, UNICEF will now consider the inclusion of sustainability costings in the scope of pilot programmes, so that a focus on the longer-term investments needed to scale-up successful programmes is included from the inception phase.

The establishment of new State entities during the year created opportunities for UNICEF to strengthen engagement for children, acknowledging that priorities for children can be addressed through collaboration with less traditional partners. In this case, UNICEF worked closely with the newly established Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency and the State Agency for Mandatory Health Insurance, to provide technical support on important system reforms and policy development.

Ensuring longer term sustainability of initiatives for children is recognized as a challenge in any context where there are multiple national priorities. UNICEF addressed this to some extent in Azerbaijan in 2018 through a number of initiatives, including investing support in the capacity of

academic institutions leading to the development of the Centre of Excellence for Inclusive Education, the Youth Worker Masters' degree programme with the Academy of Public Administration under the President, and support for routine refresher training of health professionals through medical universities. This strategy will embed routine capacity strengthening into existing pre-service and in-service training, and hopefully create a continuum of technical capacity amongst professionals in these sectors for many years.

Azerbaijan remains a country where overseas development assistance is not a significant contributor to programmes for children, with the exception of a small number of international donors. UNICEF worked throughout the year to build solid relationships with key international partners - including the European Union and the Government of the Netherlands - to secure additional financial resources to support areas of mutual interest. A key pillar of UNICEF's approach to resource mobilization in Azerbaijan has been to identify where its programme priorities for children best match the broader social development interests of international partners - such as civil society development or gender equity - and demonstrate how these aspirational goals can be effectively translated into practical progress and results through investment in the country programme. At the same time, UNICEF has focused on the non-financial value of partnerships with international supporters, for example, working with the Embassy of Brazil to showcase a Brazilian-made documentary on early childhood development as part of national advocacy efforts, and establishing an activity-based partnership with Rotary International to engage members in sports programming with young people.

Successful programme delivery continued to be reliant upon effective operational support within UNICEF. Efforts were made throughout the year to improve efficiency and effectiveness, including through a major review of processes for contracting with external specialists and consolidating guidance for partners on managing UNICEF's financial support. These reviews were especially designed to include staff working in both programme and operations areas, through small project teams. This has ensured that the resulting changes to processes fully reflect the needs and day-to-day working realities of staff who implement these processes. Efforts also continued to support increased efficiency at a UN Country Team level, with UNICEF operations staff actively engaged in the UN Business Operations Strategy, with one key result being a move towards unified banking services across the UN family in 2019.

As the demands of the country programme continue to grow, so has the recognition of a revised approach to staff professional development to ensure those implementing the programme have the required knowledge and experience to do so. During the year, management and staff worked closely to look at improvements to staff learning opportunities, resulting in the finalization of a staff human development strategy and a staff exchange programme to be implemented from 2019. The latter will enable lower and middle level staff to exchange knowledge and experience with other UNICEF offices in the region.

UNICEF Azerbaijan also benefited from expert guidance and strategic support from the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, through visits by advisers in a number of sectors. This targeted support, based on clear terms of reference and timed to coincide with, for example, preparations for the Mid-Term Review of the Country Programme, enabled UNICEF Azerbaijan to absorb broader regional experiences and connect its own work with wider priorities at the regional level.

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