Update on the context and situation of children

The last year of the 2014-2019 Country Programme was marked by a complex political, social and economic context. It was the first year of the new Government, during which radical changes in social development and poverty alleviation policy occurred, with a commitment to reach traditionally excluded groups such as indigenous populations and persons with disabilities, as well as to reduce access barriers and support more universal approaches. Changes derived from the so-called “Fourth Transformation” represent a break from “traditional” politics, which created concerns over policy predictability(1). Well-known programmes such as Prospera, one of the pioneer cash transfer programmes and a world-renowned example of social protection for families without social security; and Seguro Popular, one of the largest health insurance schemes in the world, disappeared to create new direct cash transfer schemes and health institutions. Estancias Infantiles, the main childcare scheme targeted to the poorest families with children under 6 years of age, also disappeared.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), GDP figures showed that Mexico entered a technical recession in the first quarter of 2019, and with a subsequent minute expansion of a mere 0.01% in the third quarter (2). In terms of human development, the latest HDI score worsened from 0.774 in 2017 to 0.767 in 2019, ranking 76 globally, as a high development country (3). Important challenges remain in terms of the number of people, particularly children, living in poverty (SDG1, Target 1.2): in 2018 41.9% of the population was poor (7.4% lived in extreme poverty), and 49.6% of children lived in poverty (9.3% in extreme poverty). (4) Inequalities prevail among indigenous children (particularly girls) who live in rural areas.

In Mexico, socio-economic status was a strong predictor of educational outcome. Students coming from low socio-economic background are outperformed by 81 score points in reading compared to those coming from higher socio-economic levels in the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD average: 89 score points) (5). The 2018 PISA showed that students in Mexico scored lower than the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science. Only 1% of students performed at the highest levels of proficiency (Level 5 or 6) in at least one subject (OECD average: 16%), and 35% of students did not achieve a minimum level of proficiency (Level 2) in all three subjects (OECD average: 13%). (5 Ibid.)

Furthermore, UNICEF’s Situation Analysis (SitAn) showed that 82% of students in 6th grade do not achieve satisfactory learning in language and communication, and 77% do not achieve satisfactory learning in mathematics (6), and that the out-of-school rate was 1.2% for primary school and 6.5% for lower secondary (12-14 years old) in 2018 (7), proving that Mexico still has many hurdles to overcome in meeting SDG 4 on quality education.

Obesity and overweight in children and adolescents continue to be a public health concern. Data from ENSANUT 2016 and 2018, indicate that the percentage of children with overweight and obesity was 33.2% (5-11 years old) in 2016, and 35.6% in 2018. Among those under 5 (SDG 2, Target 2.2), it was 9.7% in 2016 and 8.2% in 2018. (8). For adolescents, percentages rose from 39.2% among girls and 33.5% among boys in 2016 to 41.4% and 36% respectively in 2018. (8 Ibid).

2019 was also heavily marked by an increase in violence. As the EIU analyses, despite a change in the president’s security strategy to address social factors behind violent crime — including poverty, unemployment and prison conditions—one should not anticipate a significant reduction in violence unless a more comprehensive security strategy emerges. According to the Global Peace Index of 2019, Mexico ranked 140 among 163 countries in terms of peacefulness (9). Among OECD countries, Mexico has the highest homicide rate of 29.3 homicides per 100,000, an average of 100 deaths per day; out of which 3.7 victims of homicide are children under 18 years of age (10). Violence, particularly against women and children, continues at an alarming rate (SDG 3, 5 and 16). The adolescent birth rate was 1.6 (10-14 years old) and 65.4 (15-19 years old) per 1,000 girls, in 2016 (11). According to the ENADID 2018 the birth rate for girls 15-19 rose to 70.6 per 1,000 girls.

Mexico is highly vulnerable to the impact of natural hazards. Two-thirds of the country are exposed to seismic risk. It is also vulnerable to hurricanes and intense rains that cause floods and landslides. The country is ranked “high” in the 2019 Index for Risk Management and is among the nine countries in the world with the highest values for hazard and exposure. Nevertheless, Mexico has a solid reputation in the region for its emergency response capacity.

Migrant flows from Central America continued throughout 2019 and remains a challenge both for the country and for UNICEF Mexico, specifically due to constantly changing migration policies impacting child and adolescent migrants. There was an increasing presence of children and families, especially unaccompanied children, along Mexican borders and in transit, in need of protection and physical integrity. Officially, 157,691 people from Central America entered Mexico in 2019 through its border with Guatemala (12). Another 59,236 asylum seekers to the USA from the Migrant Protection Programme (MPP) were present in Mexico during 2019. Mexicans affected by organized crime violence in Guerrero and...
Michoacán compose an important number of migrants seeking asylum to the USA.

Prevailing austerity measures that have heavily impacted the 2020 federal budget for social programmes targeting children and adolescents, particularly for early childhood and child protection institutions, give a sense of uncertainty on policies and programmes to guarantee child rights. Still, on a positive note, there is openness, positive engagement and political will among some key government sectors to change indicators in insecurity and violence, education and health.

ENDNOTES
(6) PLANEA 2018. SEP
(7) ENIGH 2018. INEGI
(8) ENSANUT 2018. INEGI-INS
(10) INEGI. Estadísticas de mortalidad, defunciones por homicidio. 2018.
(11) ENDIREH 2016. INEGI
(12) Unidad de Política Migratoria. Ministry of Interior (SEGOB).

Major contributions and drivers of results

In 2019, being the last year of the 2014 – 2019 Country Programme and the first year of the López Obrador Government, UNICEF Mexico focused its efforts on building new relationships and partnerships with the new administration. Mexico CO provided technical advice to the Ministry of Finance as it formulated the 2020-2025 National Development Plan, by providing inputs in the areas of child poverty, health and nutrition, education, social protection and prevention of violence against children. This year also marked the last year of the 2014-2019 country programme, which meant finalizing certain lines of actions while continuing with interventions that are reflected in the new CPD. The following results were achieved this year, in line with the 2018-2021 UNICEF Strategic Plan:

Using the power of evidence to drive change for children

UNICEF Mexico produced the Child Poverty Brief, in partnership with the Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), which generated an important discussion among different ministries towards addressing child poverty in the country, as envisioned in Outcome 1 of the CPD. Findings revealed that Mexico has not improved very much in the last eight years in terms of poverty, which only decreased by 0.8 per cent; and that in 2019, 49.6 per cent of Mexico’s approximately 40 million children live in poverty. The Brief also highlighted that the greatest deprivation for children and their families is the lack of adequate access to social protection, as 60.8 per cent of children do not have access to it.

As a way to contribute to the social protection in the country, in line with Mexico’s UNSDCF 2020-2025 Outcome 1, Direct Effect 2 on access to social protection, UNICEF Mexico finalized a study on how to strengthen social protection in
emergencies and presented its recommendations to the Ministry of Wellbeing, including specific improvements to the operational guidelines of the recently created Programa para el Bienestar de las Personas en Emergencia Social o Natural (Programme for the Wellbeing of People Affected by Social or Natural Emergencies), a cash transfer programme for emergency-affected populations. At the subnational level, UNICEF Mexico collaborated with EVALUA, the institution responsible for measuring poverty and evaluating social programmes in Mexico City, by designing the socioeconomic analysis for the targeting of Mi Beca para Empezar (My Scholarship for a Good Start). This first cash transfer programme, funded by the Mexico City Government, aims to benefit one million children.

UNICEF Mexico, in partnership with the National Statistics and Geographic Institute (INEGI), produced the Statistical Overview of Violence Against Children and Adolescents, which contained a conceptual framework on the forms of violence that affect children and adolescents in Mexico and a compilation of various statistical data on violence produced by INEGI, contributing to the CPD’s Output 1.2 and Mexico’s UNSDCF Outcome 4 on peace, justice and rule of law. It was presented to various government institutions and generated important attention to the worrisome situation of violence in the country that directly affects its population under the age of 18.

Finally, for the fourth year in a row, UNICEF Mexico and the National Education Evaluation Institution (INEE) published the Overview of Indigenous and African Descendant Population Education (PEPIA). The PEPIA has been key to understand the shortfalls in terms of learning achievements in Mexico for the indigenous and Afro-descendant population: 96 out of 100 children in indigenous schools do not achieve a satisfactory score in Language and Communication in 6th grade (PLANE 2018), contributing to the CPD’s Output 3.2. on inclusive education. The PEPIA helps analyse different issues that affect learning for this specific population, which include the regulatory framework, social context, learning processes and management and learning outcomes, to name a few. Data from the PEPIA is used by the Ministry of Education (MoE) to continue to improve indigenous and Afro-descendant education in the country.

Programming excellence for at-scale results for children

This year, UNICEF Mexico collaborated with the UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (LACRO) to work with the Social Welfare Agency (DIF), the National Migration Institute (INM), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and civil society organizations on strengthening of the social workforce in Mexico, which is composed of 1,170 child protection workers, ranging from Child Protection Attorneys, mental health professionals, residential care staff, as well as migration and consular officers. The strengthening of the social workforce included: professionalization and creation of standards of competencies; emergency preparedness and response; and prevention and response to violence. The scaling-up of this initiative can potentially impact more than 35,000 children in selected states and contribute to the resilience of the child protection system in the country.

Significant migration flows continued throughout 2019, with the Ministry of Interior reporting the apprehension of 51,999 migrant children and adolescents, mostly from Central America, 23 per cent of whom were unaccompanied. In addition, Mexico hosted a total of 59,236 asylum seekers to the USA under the Migrant Protection Programme (MPP). To address this situation more effectively and at scale and to achieve more meaningful results to Output 2.3 of its CPD and UNSDCF Cross Cutting Theme 2 on migration, UNICEF Mexico opened two field offices on the northern (Tijuana) and southern (Tapachula) borders to closely assist the authorities and provide direct interventions in case management and psychosocial support, resulting in the effective management of more than 800 individual cases and provision of psychosocial care to 19,769 migrant children and adolescents. Furthermore, in collaboration with the United States Customs and Border Protection Agency (CBP), UNHCR, DIF and INM, UNICEF Mexico developed a binational protocol to fast-track the transfer of unaccompanied children in need of protection, from Mexico to the United States, which benefited 18 unaccompanied children in its pilot stage.

UNICEF Mexico spearheaded the development and adoption of the Protocol for the Comprehensive Protection of Migrant, Asylum-Seeking and Refugee children, as well as the Model on Alternative Care, which are both important contributions to end detention of child and adolescent migrants in the country. UNICEF Mexico provided technical guidance and accompaniment on the implementation of alternative care options and was successful in piloting this initiative in the states of Chihuahua, Sonora and Tabasco. In addition, UNICEF Mexico was able to position the comprehensive care reform strategy with DIF, based on the pilot foster care programme implemented with the Latin American Network for Foster Care (RELAF).

In the education sector, after four years of continuous efforts and investment by UNICEF Mexico and partners, the National Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy was finally approved on November 11, 2019 by the Ministry of Education (MoE). The Policy establishes the roles, responsibilities and different coordination structures both at the federal and state levels to deliver an integrated package of services aimed for children in their early years, which includes health, education and social protection services. These services are part of the Roadmap of Comprehensive Services developed by UNICEF Mexico and the Ministry of Health in 2017 and in collaboration with the National ECD Commission.
To promote quality learning from the early years and onwards as stated in its Output 3.1. of the CPD, UNICEF Mexico collaborated with the MoE for the development of the National Initial Education Programme (PRONEI). The programme establishes the objectives of initial education, the modalities for its implementation, as well as the goals and targets, which include a coverage increase of 30 per cent by 2024. UNICEF Mexico contributed through strategic planning and by developing the service delivery framework for the programme. UNICEF Mexico also supported the MoE to implement a pilot home visit scheme, where 3,988 children received an early education intervention in different locations in 14 states through home visits by MoE personnel, contributing to UNSDCF Outcome 1, Direct Effect 2, on access to health, education and social protection. Lessons learned from the pilot will support the expansion of the programme to the 32 states.

UNICEF Mexico also joined efforts with the Mexican Institute for Social Security (IMSS) to improve the quality of service in day-care centres. UNICEF coordinated a qualitative diagnosis to identify areas for improvement in service delivery. A capacity building workshop to enhance pedagogical methods for children in their early years was delivered to over 100 IMSS supervisors and will be replicated to all 1,147 day-care centres in the country by 2020, potentially benefiting over 196,184 children ages 0-4.

To guarantee the rights of indigenous children to learn in their own language, contributing to the achievement of its CPD Output 3.2. and UNSDCF Outcome 1, Direct Effect 2, UNICEF Mexico collaborated with the MoEs of Chiapas, Chihuahua, Guerrero and Estado de México in training 866 teachers from indigenous primary schools to read and write in their mother tongue, with the potential to reach 21,160 indigenous children. Furthermore, given that 43.2 per cent of indigenous children live in cities, UNICEF Mexico continued the implementation of the Intercultural Bilingual Educational Orientation for Urban Indigenous Children and Youth project in 40 schools in Pachuca and 100 schools in Mexico City, in partnership with the General Coordination of Intercultural and Bilingual Education (CGEIB).

In terms of nutrition, UNICEF Mexico, in line with its CPD Output 3.3. and UNSDCF Outcome 1, Direct Effect 2, strengthened its work regarding overweight and obesity prevention, with a twofold advocacy strategy favouring the adoption of a front of pack nutrition labelling (FPNL). As part of this process, UNICEF Mexico generated reference material, targeting policy makers, as well as organized a specialized regional workshop to learn from recent Latin American experiences on FPNL. UNICEF Mexico also worked with the Ministries of Health and Economy in development of NOM 051, which are guidelines to regulate nutrition labelling, a draft of which was already published by the end of 2019.

To prevent overweight and obesity in the school environment, UNICEF Mexico presented the results of the evaluation of the school-feeding program to the Ministry of Education (MoE) and representatives from all 32 Mexican states. With UNICEF support, MoE implemented a monitoring system to follow up the recommendations from the evaluation at state level. UNICEF Mexico also led an assessment of the water consumption in secondary schools. Based on the assessment findings, UNICEF Mexico is currently designing an intervention to promote safe water consumption in secondary schools in Mexico City. Additionally, the Ministry of Health invited UNICEF Mexico to participate in the development of the School Health Strategy. This strategy focuses on the promotion of safe water consumption, physical activity, healthy nutritional habits that could benefit more than 20,000 children in Mexico City.

**Winning support for the cause of children from decision-makers and the wider public**

The 30th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC@30) was placed at the centre of communication activities for 2019, contributing to Output 5.2. of the CPD. A concert in the Complejo Cultural Los Pinos, the exhibition The Children’s Right to Have Rights showcased in several states, a UNICEF-branded hot-air balloon flight and the UNICEF branding of Frida Kahlo’s Casa Azul were some of the key initiatives to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary. Mainstream media efforts had 8,054 impacts and 19,508,432 people were reached through UNICEF Mexico’s channels (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Christian Skoog’s Twitter account), with a total of 776,428 followers. In addition, a new strategy for goodwill ambassadors resulted in the appointment of renowned sculptor Jorge Marin and the appointment of the music band V-Sounds as Youth Advocates.

Through the use of U-Report, UNICEF Mexico has scaled up adolescent participation in line with Output 4.2. of the CPD, on issues of empowerment, violence prevention, prevention of adolescent pregnancies and school drop-out with the final objective of reaching more than 500,000 adolescents by 2020. This was possible through the reactivation of the U-Report Executive Committee with ConCausa (UNICEF-ECLAC initiative), SIPIPNA, the Adolescent Girls’ School of Leadership and the Mexican Red Cross.

**Developing and leveraging resources and partnerships for children**

Private sector fundraising (Output 5.1.) gross revenue experienced a dramatic growth of 31 per cent in 2019, generating US$ 10,120,989. 18,400 new pledge donors were acquired in 2019, an increase of 17 per cent from last year. Lead conversion (digital plus telemarketing) had a dramatic growth from 70,000 leads to 171,000 in one year. The Legacy campaign generated 3,743 new people interested in leaving their legacy to UNICEF. The House-list attrition was 27 per
achievements in three months by 2 per cent in Chihuahua and 9 per cent in Guerrero. This project was designed to give
curriculum, which was combined with face-to-face and on-line teaching, the project succeeded in improving learning
through the use of tablets with the Quipper educational platform containing the secondary education
Commission (ECHO), reached 4,500 adolescents between twelve and fifteen years living in violent contexts in Chihuahua
The
efforts, full implementation will be undertaken in 2020 and 2021.

at caregivers of children under five years of age in Yucatán and Morelos. Based on the lessons from this year
consists of sending text messages on breastfeeding and positive practices in infant and young child feeding and is directed
to Mexico
UNICEF Mexico designed and piloted a mobile health (mHealth) initiative to prevent all forms of malnutrition, contributing
2019.
resulted in 47,937 birth registrations in Hidalgo, 93,724 in Nuevo León, 20,864 in Nayarit and 151,216 in Jalisco during
and systematization of data is standardized, and disaggregated information by age, gender and place of origin can be
contributing to birth registration enabled at least 300,000 new birth registrations per year, guaranteeing a child’s right to identity,
contributing to Mexico’s UNSDCF 2020-2025 Outcome 2 on Prosperity and Innovation. With this new software, the capture
and systematization of data is standardized, and disaggregated information by age, gender and place of origin can be
shared among administrative registries. The software works on an online platform. However, there is also an offline
version to manage birth registrations in remote communities with no internet connection. The introduction of the software
resulted in 47,937 birth registrations in Hidalgo, 93,724 in Nuevo León, 20,864 in Nayarit and 151,216 in Jalisco during
2019.

UNICEF Mexico designed and piloted a mobile health (mHealth) initiative to prevent all forms of malnutrition, contributing
to Mexico’s UNSDCF Outcome 2 and Outcome 1, Output 1.2. on access to health and other social services. This initiative
consists of sending text messages on breastfeeding and positive practices in infant and young child feeding and is directed
at caregivers of children under five years of age in Yucatán and Morelos. Based on the lessons from this year’s piloting
efforts, full implementation will be undertaken in 2020 and 2021.

The Education with Dignity project, also in line with UNSDCF Outcome 2 and contributing to Outputs 2.2 and 3.2. of the
CPD, designed and implemented by UNICEF Mexico in partnership with the Humanitarian Aid Department of the European
Commission (ECHO), reached 4,500 adolescents between twelve and fifteen years living in violent contexts in Chihuahua
and Guerrero. Through the use of tablets with the Quipper educational platform containing the secondary education
curriculum, which was combined with face-to-face and on-line teaching, the project succeeded in improving learning
achievements in three months by 2 per cent in Chihuahua and 9 per cent in Guerrero. This project was designed to give
alternative learning strategies to adolescents who may not be able to continue school attendance on a regular basis due to the occurrence of violence in their communities.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Concluding the six years of the CPD 2014-2019, the following lessons are noted by UNICEF Mexico to enhance the implementation of the new country programme:

Programming with a Government in transition

2019 was the first year of the new government, which implied important changes to UNICEF’s way of working. Many of the initiatives that demanded several years of UNICEF’s work, such as the protection of migrant children and adolescents and policy changes towards non-detention, were impacted by continuous change in leadership; this goes as well in terms of the non-implementation of the education reform and other sectoral policies. This also meant that relationship building had to be restarted from zero, which was a setback from progress and investment in network and alliance building during the 2018 transition period. An important lesson learned in terms of programming during government transition is to have contingency plans and risk mitigation plans in place, to ensure continuity of initiatives despite changes in the government administration. In addition, planning of activities must be done with care as a good number might not be accomplished with the change of hierarchy and relationships within institutions and across sectors.

Field Monitoring

Although, programmatic visits to the field have always been a practice in the Office, as a result of the 2019 Audit, the Office has identified the need to improve field monitoring, basically by drawing up an office-wide field-visit monitoring plan to ensure appropriate coverage, scale and frequency of field-monitoring visits. The quality of such visits should also be improved by making sure that primary objectives are achieved and that staff are trained accordingly to conduct this exercise. There is also the need to establish a mechanism to ensure regular follow-up of key recommendations arising from field visits. With the introduction of eTools, the Office will enhance the quality of field monitoring reporting, as this tool provides the space to upload detailed reports and follow up on action points that are agreed after such field visits. In 2019, all staff received training on the use of the tools.

Evaluation

One of the challenges over the programme cycle has been to ensure the quality and standard of evaluations. To evaluate, per se, is a critical exercise for the office to identify impacts of programmes, projects and initiatives. Nevertheless, there have been several obstacles in ensuring quality evaluations. Many companies or institutions that offer to evaluate projects do not have the capacity expected by UNICEF in terms of quality assurance. The Office has also undertaken complex evaluations of simple projects or for which the design was not adequate. As a result, despite serious efforts from the part of the Office to carry evaluations to a certain standard, the last two evaluations have been rated as unsatisfactory. However, it is worth noting that counterparts have found the evaluations very useful and based adjustments and improvements for the future on these evaluations.

While evaluation is also a good practice to determine whether a pilot initiative can or should be taken to scale, not all pilot initiatives can be evaluated, as per HQ standards and one should also recognize the limits to what an evaluation can do. It is also important to determine beforehand whether the recommended evaluation is feasible or the necessary type: some initiatives could benefit more from a process or design evaluation rather than an impact evaluation.

Advocacy

Advocacy is another area where the office learned important lessons from this year. During 2019 the country achieved important breakthroughs on three specific issues related to children, and in which UNICEF Mexico played a crucial role. The new National Early Childhood Development Strategy, the adjustments to the National Health Law to guarantee a front of pack nutrition labelling, and the approval of the Protocol for the Comprehensive Protection of Migrant, Asylum-Seeking and Refugee children, as well as the Model on Alternative Care, to help respect the human rights of child migrants and end their detention, are examples of important successes in which UNICEF in each case teamed up with relevant governmental or non-governmental partners, clearly defined its contribution and value added, and mixed policy and public advocacy to reach the required target audience. The lesson is that if a clear objective is set, a mapping of the key stakeholders
undertaken, a selection of the main allies done, and a plan of what UNICEF will bring and with what ingredients (bilateral meetings, OpEds, press releases, technical and/or political letters, participation in strategic working groups, etc), then the probability of success is raised considerably and limited resources are efficiently invested.

As its new programme cycle begins, it is important for UNICEF Mexico to build on the successes and improve the metrics and measuring of success benchmarks to best prioritise its limited resources when it comes to public and policy advocacy. It is not least important because advocacy is the main strategy for achieving results for UNICEF Mexico.

Expansion of UNICEF’s presence

Learning from the consequences of the 2018 migrant caravans to the office’s operational capacity and its toll on human resources, UNICEF Mexico opened two field offices on the northern and southern borders of Mexico. This has created new dynamics for the office in terms of management: delegation and decentralization of tasks; moving from the classical top-down, direct supervision line to matrix management. This created some confusion in the beginning when it came to delegation of authority and tasking, as well as simple communication between different parts of the main country office towards the field offices. To avoid this in the future, a lesson learned is to develop standard operating procedures that outline programmatic and operational roles, responsibilities and accountabilities prior to the opening of field offices and ensure that these procedures form part of the onboarding procedure for field office staff.