

## Oman

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### Part 1: Situation update in the country

The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of US\$16,036 of the Sultanate of Oman ranked it as a high-income country and allows its citizens to enjoy a high standard of living. The Sultanate also made progress in human development indicators, confirmed by a high human development index of 0.861 in 2017, ranking the country as 48 out of 184 countries. This index testifies to the fact that economic stability and income growth have gone hand-in-hand, with advances for the overall social well-being of the Omanis and particularly the children of Oman.

Government policies have led to rapid reductions in child and maternal mortality, as well as to universal access to health, primary education and safe water services, and an impressive social welfare system for every Omani national. Progress achieved in promoting the rights of children was recognized by the Committee on the Rights of the Child at the Oman Concluding Observations 2016. Significant progress has also been made in women's empowerment and gender equality as well: Oman is among the Arab countries that lead in the realization of women's rights. Oman was praised by the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women for its positive record in adhering to human rights conventions.

The Government is committed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and is taking steps to support delivery and establishing institutional structures to map and monitor progress. This includes strengthening of administrative data systems to monitor progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.

In 2018, no significant changes to the situation of children and women were witnessed, as the economic and political situation in the country remained stable.

The population of Oman in 2017 was 4.6 million; of those, 2.5 million (55 per cent) were Omani nationals and 2.1 million (45 per cent) were expatriates. The population of Omani nationals is relatively young compared to the expatriate population. According to 2017 figures, 15 per cent of Omani nationals were under five years old, and 46 per cent were under 20 years old; compared to 1.5 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively, for the expatriate population of Oman.

According to 2017 figures, the employed population of Oman (excluding those in the armed forces) totalled 2.3 million. However, of those, 81 per cent were expatriates and 19 per cent

were Omani nationals. Hence, when excluding the armed forces, the number of employed expatriates is more than four times the number of employed Omanis. As such, the Government initiated a policy of 'Omanisation', to replace expatriate workers with Omani nationals. To achieve Omanisation goals, education – specifically, the quality and outcomes of education – is a national priority. Oman made achievements to universal education access and in expanding education infrastructure. However, the country still needs to improve the qualitative aspects of the education system, such as learning outcomes and the match of graduates' skills with labour market requirements.

Oman's economy is dependent on oil: oil revenue was 84.3 per cent of the Government's total revenue in 2014. A drastic decline in the price of oil from US\$96.3 per barrel in 2014 to US\$40.7 per barrel in 2016 had a detrimental impact on the economy. Even though the country is proceeding with plans to diversify its economy in line with Sustainable Development Goal 8 and 'Tanfeedh', an initiative to diversify national income resources, Oman's economy and public budget remain highly dependant on oil.

Austerity measures and cuts in social sector spending followed the drop in oil prices; the 2017 budget witnessed cuts of 3.7 per cent, 3.3 per cent and 4.7 per cent, respectively, for education, health, and social security, from the 2016 budget. With a stronger economy in 2018, on the back of increased oil revenue, the 2018 budget increased allocations for education, health, and public services, but further reduced allocation for social security.

The fluctuation of the public budget during 2014 to 2018 brings to the fore two important matters: 1) The need to maximize quality results from public expenditure by expediting the move towards performance- and programme-based budgeting; and 2) the sustainability of finances for children must be prioritized, given the expected downward trend in oil prices due to expansion of alternative sources of energy.

The Child Well-being and Empowerment Index of Oman, published by UNICEF Oman and the National Centre for Statistics and Information in 2018, confirmed achievements for children. The index assesses child well-being holistically, rather than through single indicators, for children and adolescents from birth to 18 years of age. It comprises indicators covering five domains: material well-being, education, the home environment of the child, risks and behaviour issues, and health and nutrition. When compared with other countries, most of the indices score high for Oman.

For example, the Sultanate is among the top five percent of countries in the world to provide comprehensive health coverage free of cost to its citizens. Although its ranking comes after 38 countries in income and after 59 countries in consumption, indicators covered by the index showed that Omanis enjoy a higher level of health benefits and protection than citizens of most high-income countries. Oman also has the highest levels of protection against substance use, as Oman population is near the top of countries in terms of being free from drug use. Oman also ranks near the top on food security and immunization.

Despite this progress, however, sub-regional disparities in Oman highlight equity concerns. For example, gross enrolment indices are over 90 across all governorates, except for two governorates: Al Wusta (mid-central) and Ash Sharqiyah (northeast). Overall, Al Wusta is the lowest on the Child Well-Being and Empowerment Index, followed by Dhofar (southeast), while Muscat (northeast) and Musandam (north) are the top performers. The report also identified data gaps, especially as they pertain to relevant Sustainable Development Goal indicators and particularly disaggregation of indicators at the sub-national level.

### **Health and nutrition**

Oman achieved universal health coverage, including antenatal care and institutional delivery. Success in tackling infectious diseases means that the main contributors to newborn deaths are now congenital abnormalities and the events surrounding childbirth. Maternal and child nutrition need attention to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2. The Millennium Development Goal 1, on halving the underweight prevalence rate among children under five years old, was achieved. Oman now has a “low” prevalence in child stunting, but wasting is still of “medium” prevalence as defined by the World Health Organization.

Both stunting and wasting show significant disparities between regions as evidenced by the Oman National Nutrition Survey. Stunting rates increased from 9.8 per cent in 2009 to 11.4 per cent in 2017. Wasting rates increased from 7.1 per cent in 2009 to 9.3 in 2017. Despite progress due to the Government’s wheat flour fortification programme, anaemia still affects 23.7 per cent of young children in Oman. The international estimate of the maternal mortality ratio (17 per 100,000) in Oman is higher than other countries in the Middle East and North Africa region. Maternal nutrition is poor, as shown by the rate of newborns with low birthweight (11.7 per cent in 2017) and anaemia rate among women who are pregnant (29.3 per cent in 2017). The persistent and relatively high stunting and wasting, and poor maternal health and nutrition in a high-income country, indicate the need to improve health and nutrition knowledge and infant and young child feeding practices.

### **Early childhood development and early childhood education**

Despite progress, the pre-primary enrolment figures of Oman lag behind the region’s, and early childhood education programmes are of variable quality. Significant progress is needed if early childhood development and education targets in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 are to be achieved. At the end of 2016, only 68 per cent of children participated in organized learning, one year before the official primary entry age. The rate was lower for boys (67 per cent) than girls (69 per cent). The early childhood development index rate is 68 per cent for Oman. Even though the Ministry of Education is taking steps to increase access to early childhood education services, currently most services are in cities operated by private sector entities, which means they are difficult to access for children of lower-income households, especially in remote areas. A cross-sector approach is needed in terms of policy and coordination across ministries, an area UNICEF Oman is working on.

### **Education**

Oman achieved universal primary education and continues to improve in secondary education

enrolment (95.1 per cent in 2016). Literacy rates among young people aged 15-24 years are universal. To match its impressive achievements in access to education in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4, Oman is focused on enhancing education quality and improving teaching-learning outcomes.

National and international assessments show learning outcomes are below expectations in literacy, science, and mathematics, and sizeable disparities between students from different wealth quintiles, and between urban and remote areas. The 'Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study' and 'Progress in International Reading Literacy Study' indicate that 59 per cent of students at the end of primary are achieving minimum proficiency in reading. The rate is much lower for boys (50 per cent) than girls (68 per cent). Meanwhile, only 61 per cent of students achieve minimum proficiency in mathematics, with girls (65 per cent) out-performing boys (56 per cent) once again. Literacy rates in younger groups do not show any gender gap. The gender parity index in Oman increases in favour of girls as children progress from grades 1 to 12.

### **Education for children with disabilities**

While 56 per cent of public schools in Oman implement a special education programme according to Ministry of Education Statistics 2017/2018, the classes are not integrated within regular classrooms and the limited number of teachers accredited in inclusive learning approaches cannot keep up with the rapid expansion of education services for children with disabilities. Up until recently, inclusion was taken to mean that in regular schools, children with disabilities attended special classes, as opposed to having them in regular classes of students with no disabilities.

### **Protection and care**

The 2014 Child Law makes reporting on maltreatment against children mandatory and facilitates the rescue and removal of children through dedicated child protection committees that exist across the country's 11 governorates. Yet, a significant proportion of children and young people are exposed to violence in school, community and family. The Ministry of Health reporting and referral system for domestic violence is under-utilized; and data systems are inadequate to define the scale and scope of child maltreatment. The child protection hotline launched in January 2017 had already received 330 cases of child abuse during its first year of operation and witnessed an increase during the year to 570 cases at the end of the third quarter of 2018, according to the Oman Social Indicators Report. In schools, bullying is a concern, with 29 per cent of students reporting to have been bullied about monthly according to the 2015 Trends in International Mathematics and Science report. Culturally accepted practices still impede efforts to address the problem.

### **Children with disabilities**

In total, 62,500 people in Oman have some form of disability, of which 7,400 (or 12 per cent) are children below the age of 15 years according to a 2010 Oman Census. This figure is widely considered to be under-reported. Oman has a range of specialized and mainstream services for children with disabilities. Most services are limited to the major cities and are of varying

quality. The major constraint to expanding services beyond cities is the cost of specialized services.

The breakdown of causes shows that child disability can be prevented or reduced. The Ministry of Health has services for the early detection of disability among children and provides genetic testing and health screening services for couples who enter consanguineous marriages, but such services are poorly utilised. Families need to be more aware of the causes, prevention and treatment of child disability. Disaggregated data on children with disabilities in line with Sustainable Development Goal requirements is also lacking. Data systems on child disability and related services are inadequate and prone to under-reporting.

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

### Key results achieved

Recognizing the Sultanate's high-income country context, the UNICEF Joint Programme with the Government of Oman (2017 – 2020) seeks to undertake targeted high-impact interventions that address the country's "unfinished business". This includes issues related to quality of service, institutional capacity and inadequate behavioural and social norms. During 2018, UNICEF Oman made significant gains towards achieving progress on the following prioritized outcome areas:

1. By 2020, high quality, inclusive integrated early childhood development services, with strong parent and caregiver engagement, are available to all children, especially the vulnerable, in two select governorates;
2. By 2020, families, caregivers, and service providers offer quality, effective protection practices and services for all children at risk of or exposed to violence;
3. By 2020, children with disabilities enjoy quality services that promote their inclusion in Omani society.

A range of strategies was employed, ranging from strengthening of national systems and engagement in policy dialogue to building of capacity at national and sub-national level to enhance the delivery of services, especially for vulnerable children such as those with disabilities. UNICEF Oman also worked on strengthening the UNICEF brand and knowledge around child-care practices to affect behavioural change, and supported children as agents of change through World Children's Day activities. The UNICEF country office hosted its first-ever Sustainable Development Goals Carnival to raise awareness around the Goals, targeting children, their parents as well as key government counterparts.

Evidence generation was an effective strategy, yielding results for children. Data generated throughout the year was leveraged into evidence-based strategies and policies for children, and informed multi-sectoral programming across the Government and beyond. Most notably, UNICEF Oman took the first steps in supporting the Government to enhance administrative

data systems; ensure Sustainable Development Goal requirements are met; and support the country with monitoring progress towards its commitment to Agenda 2030.

Sustainable Development Goal child-related indicators were mapped against relevant data systems, with the findings leveraged to enhance evidence and stronger data systems for children. UNICEF Oman has an established country presence and is well-positioned to play a convening role in technical support for the Sustainable Development Goals; this is particularly important given the absence of a formalized Resident Coordinator system and the fact that the United Nations Development Programme is not present in the country.

In 2018, UNICEF Oman broke ground leveraging partnerships for children and harnessing the power of business to impact change for children. The country office expanded partnerships beyond its traditional counterparts within the Government to civil society as well as academic institutions. UNICEF signed a memorandum of understanding with the largest telecom provider in the Sultanate and established a leadership circle of influential business leaders. This has resulted in enhanced support for the children's agenda in Oman.

Finally, UNICEF Oman continued to engage in dialogue on Oman's obligations under the United Nations conventions related to women and children, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Key programme achievements have contributed to progress towards these instruments.

Results achieved during the reporting period will ensure better outcomes for children in Oman, in line with UNICEF's Global Strategic Plan Areas 1, 2, 3 and 5 as well as the Sustainable Development Goals.

### **Goal area 1: Every child survives and thrives**

Integrated early childhood development is a key programme outcome that aligns with Oman's commitment to Sustainable Development Goals 2, 3, 4 and 5, as well as the Ninth National Development Plan goal to ensure that children arrive in school "ready to learn", through expansion of early childhood services across Oman.

#### **Integrated early childhood development**

UNICEF Oman formed an integrated early childhood development taskforce comprised of all relevant ministries and stakeholders working for children, under the Ministry of Social Development and UNICEF Oman as co-chairs. The taskforce carried out a review of the national early childhood development policies and strategies and developed a workplan to build and strengthen multi-sectoral approaches and solutions for enhancing the quality and coverage of integrated early childhood development and early childhood education services in Oman. Key pillars for the development of a model were identified and work is on-going on developing an Omani model for early childhood development services for children under four years old, and community/home-based early childhood education solutions for children four to five years,

as well as pre-school services for children five to six years old. Officials from the taskforce carried out a study tour this year to look into other countries' experiences.

UNICEF Oman initiated its review of better public financing options to ensure equity and efficiencies in spending as the Government works to fulfil its commitments to children and expands access to Integrated early childhood development and early childhood education services. This is an area that traditionally been closed off to UNICEF Oman and is thus considered a pertinent achievement towards more upstream and impactful engagement.

## **Nutrition**

Building evidence for effective child programming, UNICEF Oman and the Ministry of Health completed the National Nutrition Survey. The survey findings generated disaggregated nutrition data for the first time since 2009 for children under five years of age, women of reproductive age who are not pregnant and women who are, disaggregated for all 11 governorates. Data from the survey highlighted sub-regional discrepancies with variations in health outcomes between governorates. The findings were instrumental in encouraging sub-national planning and engagement as key public and private stakeholders, as well as resident United Nations agencies, placed importance on investing in nutrition to bolster multi-sectoral approaches to nutrition-related systems, policies and procedures.

To ensure sustainable impact, a targeted Nutrition Action Plan was developed and mainstreamed into the national action plan to combat non-communicable diseases. The national action plan is managed by the multi-sectoral non-communicable disease committee, a high-level body which meets on a regular basis and ensures that strategic and effective action is taken for better health and nutrition outcomes. Areas highlighted for action include: the need for a national social behavioural change communication campaign; the need for strengthening of nutrition surveillance, such as regular weight and height monitoring in children; and the need for promotion of physical activity in schools and communities. A number of areas are already being addressed through the UNICEF Oman programme.

To bolster the favourable outcomes of the Nutrition Action Plan, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Health Organization and UNICEF Oman supported an inter-agency project on 'leveraging the food system in Oman for better health and nutrition'. This joint programme contributes to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2, and adopts the comprehensive Sustainable Food System Approach to achieve healthy diets, adequate nutrition, good health and well-being for all in a sustainable manner, while managing natural resources responsibly. The four foundational pillars of this project are: 1) diversified food system and diets of the Omani population; 2) developed sustainable and efficient production; 3) strengthened policies for sustainable nutrition/food system; and 4) consumer awareness for sustainable and optimal quality food consumption.

Evidence from the Oman National Nutrition Survey was leveraged to conduct a review of national food fortification policies and standards to ensure that the Ministry of Health implements and expands targeted regulations that are in line with current World Health

Organization standards for fortified staple foods. The aim of the review was to enhance the Government's already effective fortification programme, to improve micronutrient deficiencies within the population. The assessment identified a number of actions which have been endorsed by the Ministry of Health and will be integrated into the Nutrition Action Plan; these include: strengthening of the food-control system to ensure that the food fortification programme is being effectively monitored; establishment of a national multi-sectoral food fortification committee, made up of relevant ministries and industry; expansion of the food fortification programme to include other food vehicles such as milk products.

## **Goal area 2: Every child learns**

As the country moves towards the 'Omanisation' of its economy, investment in quality education was prioritized by the Government to ensure that Omanis are properly prepared for the requirements of the labour market. The Government took essential steps towards inclusive education with support from UNICEF Oman. Achievements in this area will contribute to Oman's progress towards Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5.

### **Child friendly education**

Following an evaluation of the child-friendly schools' pilot and a request from the Ministry of Education, UNICEF Oman supported the shift away from the project approach towards mainstreaming child-friendly education principles into the national education system, and translation of lessons learned into policy guidelines. In 2018, the governance structure for child-friendly education in Oman was finalized and endorsed, ensuring that the system is robustly institutionalized within the ministry. This achievement builds on the completion of guidelines and protocols for implementation of the child-friendly education model at the national, governorate and school levels.

The child-friendly education strategy proposes six principles as thematic organisers for schools: inclusion; democratic participation; child-centeredness; and protection; and two cross-cutting principles on equity and resilience and sustainability.

Once these principles are taken to scale, child-friendly education will result in rights-based education that is of quality with better teaching-learning outcomes for children and youth, building the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values required by the modern labour market. Child-friendly education will also ensure that all learners can realize their full potential in a safe and protected environment and that all children and youth participate and benefit in an equitable manner.

As part of the endorsed governance structure, a national coordination team was established and its capacity built on child-friendly education principles, communication approaches to raise awareness on child-friendly education, as well as the governance structure for implementation. This ensures strengthened institutional capacity, as the team will play a pivotal role in guiding schools and governorates in managing and executing the mainstreaming child-friendly education across Oman. A comprehensive user manual for mainstreaming child-friendly



education in school improvement plans was finalized and validated under the leadership of the national team. This will be followed by capacity building of school teachers, principals, supervisors and administrators, as well as relevant committees, at governorate and central ministry levels.

To assess child-friendly education implementation at the school level, a benchmark and monitoring framework was developed to facilitate monitoring child-friendly education indicators as well as Sustainable Development Goal 4 indicators. This would support monitoring and measuring performance of learners, teachers, schools, and governorates following the child-friendly education mainstreaming process. The framework is to be embedded within the national Education Management Information System (EduPortal), a system for assessing performance of schools and teachers that collects most of the data for monitoring progress and measuring results.

Proper internalization of the child-friendly education principles implies that interventions go beyond change in teaching methods and curricula. UNICEF Oman, together with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health, launched a localized version of the 'Kid Power' programme. Named 'Al Haraka Baraka' (to move is a blessing), the programme offers children the opportunity to unlock their school's improvement plan; in turn, teaching them the sense of accountability, responsibility and global citizenship, and the ability to effect change for their peers. The focus is on collective effort by students as opposed to individual performance. Girls and children with disabilities are equal participants and part of the competing teams. Moreover, as children's activity is monitored through fitness trackers, it encourages them to partake in physical activity otherwise hindered by the country's in conducive climate and a growing use of technology. This is particularly important for girls who tend to have less opportunity to engage in physical activity. The initiative is in line with the child-friendly education principles and ensures that children's life skills are built in adherence to the MENA Life Skills and Citizenship Education Initiative.

### **Inclusive education**

In support to the inclusion agenda, UNICEF Oman developed an Inclusive Education Teacher Training Guide for teachers in cycle 1 (grades 1 – 4), to strengthen the capacity of teachers to incorporate inclusive approaches for children with disabilities into their teaching methodology and classroom management. This will enhance learning outcomes in general, as teaching methods become more responsive to diverse learning needs. The training is being institutionalized into the professional training programme of in-service teachers and new teachers within the Ministry of Education specialized teacher training centre. The training guide builds on the wealth of resources on inclusive education developed by UNICEF and UNESCO, as well as the MENA Life Skills and Citizenship Education Initiative, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and is in line with work conducted on child-friendly education. This aligns with Strategic Plan Goal Area 5, as equity concerns are addressed in education and beyond.

Support was provided to develop an inclusive-school policy and roadmap that adopts a whole-

school approach to equitable inclusion of all students within the Omani education system. The framework emphasises the need for: policies for inclusion to be informed by evidence; actions to promote a whole-school approach to inclusion, in which teachers are supported in developing inclusive practices; and education staff to lead in the promotion of inclusion. All require the experience and expertise of those involved in the lives of children to inform developments.

To inform development of the policy, an assessment of the situation in four schools across two governorates was completed with the aim of exploring existing barriers, enablers and opinions linked to building an inclusive approach.

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

Protection of children from violence is a key national priority. It aligns with the National Childhood Strategy 2015-2025, the Child Law 2014, as well as the Sultanate's commitment to international conventions and Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 10. In 2018, significant achievements were made in strengthening systems and services for vulnerable children and building institutional capacity in this area.

#### **Cross-sectoral case management for children**

A cross-sectoral case management system was established with support from UNICEF Oman and endorsed by the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Development. The system will ensure an effective, efficient and well-coordinated continuum of care in integrated early childhood development, and protection and inclusion of children with disabilities. By enabling collaboration and coordination among sectors and services, the needs of vulnerable children and their families can be met: with greater effect of each service and a more sustained impact. Accordingly, girls and boys and their families would receive support and effective and timely response and referral to needed services to address their protection concerns; resulting in better development outcomes for children across the life-cycle.

Standard operating procedures, tools and a governance structure were developed to provide a mechanism for effective referral within and across sectors. The case management platform leverages existing structures and services to enable a holistic approach to prevention, response and monitoring for children with disabilities and those at risk of violence. Work involved a desk review; consultations in four governorates with parents, service providers and other stakeholders; as well as capacity building of service providers. Over 40 male and female social workers were trained to apply the new approach to case management. The system is being piloted in two governorates before it is to be scaled up nationally.

UNICEF Oman is also working with the Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health on a management information system solution, for automation of the case management system for integrated early childhood development, protection and disability. Once in place, this will be more efficient across sectors, with timely response and substantive effectiveness of services for girls and boys. In cooperation with the UNICEF Jordan Country

Office, a study tour to Jordan was organized for IT focal points from the three ministries to look at management information systems for potential operation in Oman. The visit focused on acquainting the Omani delegation with their experience with Primero for case management.

Building on the study tour, the group is working on an assessment of the digitized system for case management of Jordan and other systems based on their requirements and the Omani context. Some ministerial data systems have the potential to expand and evolve into an integrated case management platform and are being considered, given that: 1) Primero is not perceived as the most cost-effective solution as it requires investment in infrastructure and human resources to manage and sustain the platform; 2) the programming language of Primero is not in use in Oman and would thus require specific capacity building of IT cadre to ensure that maintenance can be managed locally; 3) Jordan's digitized case management system is not an open-source platform.

A detailed costed proposal is being developed by counterparts to be shared with the cross-sectoral Programme Management Group. Once a suitable approach is identified, UNICEF Oman's level of support and involvement will be determined.

#### **Goal area 5: Every child an equitable chance in life**

Ensuring equitable programming for children is a priority for the Government. In particular the Government is focused on ensuring that data on children with disabilities is properly captured and that they have access to specialized care and services. Achievements in this area directly contribute to progress towards Sustainable Development Goals 1, 5 and 10.

#### **Inclusion of children with disabilities**

In 2018, UNICEF Oman worked on development of a unified national disability classification which was endorsed by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Development. An assessment of their disability classification and identification system was completed and validation of a proposed harmonised assessment approach across the three sectors was received. The approach is appropriate for purposes of assessment, incorporating a multi-step process as follows: 1) a medical assessment to be undertaken by the Ministry of Health in line with the International Classification of Diseases, 2) a functional assessment to be undertaken by the Ministry of Social Development social workers, in line with the International Classification of Functioning, and 3) a disability assessment to be undertaken by rehabilitation specialists within relevant sectors, to determine the services to ensure inclusion. The development of a holistic and unified approach to classification will ensure children with disabilities are accurately captured and included within specialised care and education services.

The work on a unified disability classification and the establishment of an interlinked national registry will support the Government in strengthening evidence and analysis about the situation of children with disabilities. This will ensure routine data collection on the numbers of children with disabilities, as well as the coverage and quality of specialized care and education services.

In collaboration with Georgetown University, a workshop was conducted on contemporary practices in early intervention, with the objective of introducing counterparts from the Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Health to the essential elements of early intervention. Over 30 practitioners from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Development as well as the Ministry of Social Development Al-Wafa Centers for Early Intervention were targeted for capacity building.

The workshop identified the need and relevance of such a programme in the Omani context. The programme was well-received and discussions were led with Sultan Qaboos University to explore launching it as an accredited training programme in Oman. The potential of running this programme with Georgetown University is being considered. Initially, the programme would target professionals engaged in this line of work, such as the 157 practitioners working at the Al Wafa Centers across the country. This could allow for an initial cohort of 20 to 30 people during the first year of the programme.

## **Cross-cutting work**

### **Evidence generation and the sustainable development goals**

The Child Well-being and Empowerment Index report, developed jointly with the National Centre for Statistical Information, was endorsed in 2018. It is considered a key research piece, as Oman is the first country in the region to map child well-being and empowerment with a composite index that it developed for its own use. The report compares Oman to other countries and contributed to the identification of sub-regional disparities within Oman. The report also identifies data gaps, especially as they pertain to relevant Sustainable Development Goal indicators and administrative data structures at the sub-national level.

To address these gaps, UNICEF Oman supported the National Centre for Statistical Information with a targeted mapping exercise of 29 Sustainable Development Goal child-related indicators against relevant administrative data systems and civil registration and vital statistics that have the potential to be monitored via administrative data sources. Strengthening these systems will support evidenced-based policies and programmes, and measure achievements towards Agenda 2030.

Of these 29 indicators, nine (32 per cent) have data available from administrative data sources in line with metadata requirements of the Sustainable Development Goals. Another 16 indicators (57 per cent) have data that are partially available, or a proxy indicator is being used, or the metadata does not wholly align with Sustainable Development Goal specifications. The remaining four indicators are not being collected, or not available, through administrative sources at this point in time.

The mapping exercise identified a few areas of potential concern, to be addressed if administrative data sources are to be fully utilised for Sustainable Development Goal monitoring. These include: 1) methodological issues related to use of incorrect or unclear

methods when calculating indicators values; 2) a need for formalization of relationships between the National Centre for Statistical Information and other relevant agencies, as many indicators cut across sectors resulting in the need to use multiple administrative data sources; 3) coverage of indicators (e.g. in some cases data is only captured on Omani residents, while the remaining 50 per cent of expatriates are excluded); 4) disaggregation in line with Sustainable Development Goal meta data is not always available.

Findings and recommendations from the exercise go beyond these 29 indicators to address broader data system concerns as the country moves towards an administrative-based e-census in 2020. A strategy for strengthening the relevant data systems is under development and will be an essential lobbying tool to advocate for better evidence on children.

### **Social behavioural change communication and the knowledge, attitudes and practices survey**

UNICEF Oman launched an extensive communication campaign, using a variety of media channels including UNICEF Oman and partners' social media and local media outlets, to deliver targeted messages on programme themes such as integrated early childhood development, exclusive breastfeeding, child nutrition, positive discipline and inclusion of children with disabilities. Through UNICEF Oman social media channels, the campaign reached over 6,000 users on Facebook, amassed over 1,000 followers on Instagram and created over 294,000 impressions on Twitter. The outreach through social media channels of the Government – UNICEF Oman programme are at least five times greater.

Meanwhile, the social behavioural-change communication programme was launched to equip key ministries and frontline service providers, caregivers, parent support groups, teachers and other stakeholders with knowledge and best practices, to address essential behaviours that cut across integrated early childhood development, child protection and inclusion of children with disabilities. Interventions will empower stakeholders at all levels to address traditional social norms and provide an enabling environment for children to reach their full potential.

During the year, a high-level meeting was conducted with the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Information to familiarise counterparts with the social behavioural-change communication approach, and to build capacity and awareness. Thirty-nine government officials attended, including four at the under-secretary level. Most notably, the workshop endorsed the social behavioural-change communication programme in Oman. In follow up to the workshop, specific behaviours to target were identified with support from government counterparts, including childcare and feeding practices, low enrolment in pre-school, violence against children in school, and inclusion of children with disabilities in education and beyond. The scoping exercise emphasized that parenting practices would reap significant return, given that they cut across almost all key behaviours identified. The determinants of the behaviours will be researched, including qualitative and quantitative knowledge, attitude and practice studies and a barrier analysis on infant and young child feeding practices to inform an evidence-based social behavioural-change communication strategy. The studies will also ensure monitoring can be conducted, to

show results and build the case for the social behavioural-change communication component of the programme.

A social behavioural-change communication taskforce, made up of counterparts from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Health, was established to guide and implement the work. To build capacity of the taskforce, one of its members was enrolled in the 2018 C4D Global Learning Course. Meanwhile, expanded partnerships have been established with the Ministry of Information, private sector such as Omantel and civil society to support effective mainstreaming of the social behavioural-change communication campaign.

### **Public finance for children**

To build awareness on public finance for children among key government counterparts and explore areas for support in this area, a review mission to Oman was conducted in the last quarter of 2018. This was followed by orientation meetings at UNICEF headquarters for senior officials from the Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Education. This was critical in building partners' awareness on public finance for children and other themes closely linked to financing for children.

During 2019 UNICEF Oman will support the Government in exploring public-private partnerships for financing interventions for children, particularly services for children with disabilities, in addition to design of a strategy. Support will also be provided for development of a costing and financing strategy for scaling up of the early childhood development/ early childhood education and rolling-out of programme-based budgeting.

### **Partnerships and advocacy**

Traditionally, UNICEF Oman only worked with the Government specifically with the Ministries of Education, Health and Social Development and the National Center for Statistics and Information. The country office is now expanding its partnerships to non-government organizations, the private sector and within the Government. To this end, UNICEF Oman launched its communication, advocacy and partnerships strategy in early 2018 that leverages resources for children for better results and promotes shared values.

### **Public sector**

To engage with other state institutions and organizations that influence the national agenda, new partnerships were pursued with the Ministry of Higher Education, academic and research institutions (such as the Research Council and State Council, Sultan Qaboos University). Strategic partnerships were explored with the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, as well as quasi government organizations with corporate social responsibility budgets.

### **Private sector**

Through partnerships with the private sector, UNICEF Oman promotes the responsibility to respect and support children's rights, and advocates for better outcomes for children that go beyond raising financial resources for its programme. Key alliances and partnerships were

established in 2018 to further the children's agenda in Oman:

### **Leadership Circle**

In an effort to engage more meaningfully with the private sector, high net-worth individuals and key influencers, UNICEF Oman formed a group of leaders in society, in both private and public sector, and who have an interest in championing results for children in Oman. The Leadership Circle is an advisory group of private sector executives who provide UNICEF Oman with advice on strategic direction and are capable of facilitating dialogue between the Government and private sector, and in mobilizing political influence and resources for key programme areas.

The Circle was inaugurated on the 28th of March 2018 and convened three times to discuss the recently-launched Oman National Nutrition Survey, education and learning outcomes, and UNICEF Oman's 2019/2020 priorities. Members of the Circle have been instrumental in contributing to the national nutrition plan and have committed to supporting education for young people.

### **Omantel**

UNICEF Oman signed a memorandum of understanding with Omantel, the largest telecom provider in the Sultanate. The partnership will improve access to information regarding health, nutrition, education and child-protection, while pushing forward various innovative projects supported by UNICEF Oman. The memorandum, with a duration of 18 months, focuses on Omantel providing its big-data services to UNICEF Oman to disseminate messages for the social behavioural-change communication programme. Messages will target population groups identified through Omantel's big data technology. The campaign will commence in 2019.

Pursuant to the partnership, and in an effort to adopt a mutually-beneficial approach based on shared values, UNICEF Oman is supporting Omantel by providing workshops to strengthen the corporate social responsibility, and support development of action plans for their corporate strategy to be gender-sensitive and child-rights focused. The topics include Sustainable Development Goals and E-government; gender equality and women in business; and child rights and business principles with a focus on information, communication and technology.

The first two workshops were delivered and attended by Omantel's staff and corporate clients. The third workshop will be delivered in January 2019. Participants showed commitment to address company policies on gender equality, and expressed eagerness to support the state institutions in their initiatives with respect to e-governance.

### **Civil society**

In order to broaden its engagement beyond the public and private sector, UNICEF Oman signed a MoU with the Children First Association, Oman's leading association for children, led by Her Highness Muna Al Said. The Association will support UNICEF Oman in its social behavioural-change communication agenda, with messages that raise awareness and encourage action for health, education, nutrition, protection, and the inclusion of children with disabilities. The signing ceremony launched UNICEF Oman mascots "Saif" and "Muzna",

cartoon characters developed as a part of the partnership agreement to engage children and deliver joint messages to the public.

## **Communications**

### **Digital media**

A 2018 social media strategy bolstered stakeholder relations and engaged the public in an active manner. Instagram, Twitter and Facebook channels raised awareness on the UNICEF Oman brand and advocated for best-practices in child rearing.

### **Events and campaigns**

In 2018, UNICEF Oman hosted a Sustainable Development Goal Carnival as part of a United Nations campaign to raise awareness and encourage families and the community to participate in achieving the goals in their own lives. The Carnival welcomed more than 250 families and provided them with information on UNICEF Oman and the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as take-away material for maintaining long-term commitment to the Goals. The Carnival was supported by private sector entities; print and television media provided coverage.

UNICEF Oman supported the Ministry of Education to launch the World Largest Lesson in November 2018. The World Largest Lesson involved UNESCO, the Ministry of Social Development, the National Committee for Education, Culture, and Science, and the Oman Environment Society. The launch event included games, workshops, and lessons on sustainability aimed at teaching children best practices early in their lives. Twenty-six schools (including child-friendly education schools and UNESCO associated schools), took part in activities under the UNICEF Oman World Largest Lesson activity pack and participated in workshops on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, global goals, biodiversity and correct usage of water and electricity.

World Children's Day was celebrated with takeover activities that involved over 35 students from public schools and Children First Association. Students took over leading institutions; they worked the newsroom at the Public Authority for Radio and Television, ran a mock drill for a weather disaster at the emergency response center under the Ministry of Health, and shadowed five vice presidents of Omantel. Students also shadowed the Deputy Chairman of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the CEO at SIEMENS Oman and the UNICEF Oman Representative.

Finally, UNICEF Oman, together with the World Health Organization and the United Nations Population Fund, provided technical support to the Government of Oman to hold the Second Regional Adolescent Health Conference. The conference sought to: 1) enhance understanding of the key concepts in adolescent and youth health; 2) address cultural barriers that hinder adolescents and young girls to live an active healthy life, and provide solutions; 3) highlight key challenges and barriers in adolescent and youth health; 4) identify multi-sectoral experiences, innovations and practices; 5) highlight mechanisms to put adolescents as key players in protection of their own health; and 6) create awareness around negative behaviours that



impact adolescent and youth health.

Commitments made to set up a broad-based partnership to identify solutions with young people that are ready to be taken to scale. This is critical as UNICEF Oman's work will expand to cover programming for adolescents in line with programme review recommendations.

### **Public relations**

UNICEF Oman strengthened efforts to engage the media in Oman, especially print media which remains a dominant source of information for the majority of the population. UNICEF Oman experienced an increase in media mentions, with several articles published in 2018. Two radio interviews, and a TV interview with the UNICEF Oman Representative by the Sultanate's only national television network were aired, the latter was viewed by 51 per cent of the Omani population.

### **Gender**

In a high-income country context, UNICEF Oman's focus promotes gender analysis of Government programmes and policies, ensuring that gender-disaggregated data is available. The National Nutrition Survey provided key nutritional data on women ages 15-49 and provided sex-disaggregated data on children under five years old, ensuring that targeted interventions can be undertaken for both boys and girls. Meanwhile, work on strengthening Sustainable Development Goal monitoring and reporting through the administrative data mapping and strengthening exercise will enhance data systems to ensure that key disaggregation requirements such as sex, age and geography are taken into consideration as the country moves forward with its data systems strengthening programmes.

UNICEF Oman conducted a workshop on Gender Equality and Sustainable Development Goal 5 at the premises of Omantel, part of a partnership agreement with Omantel. Attended by staff and corporate clients, including private and government entities, the workshop participants explored exemplary efforts by global and regional telecommunication companies and interventions from industries to close the gender gap in the workplace. The group expressed their commitment to explore improving diversity, including hiring and promotion practices such as job shadowing for women to explore the range of job opportunities; flexibility to fit work into the lives of employees (including on-site day care and paternity leave); and championship of a diversity culture by senior leaders and management.

## **Part 3: Lessons learned and constraints**

### **Lessons learned**

Operating in a high-income country such as Oman, which still benefits from programme support from UNICEF on a wide range of matters, requires modifications from the programming usually designed for low and middle-income countries. Following a review of the UNICEF Oman

Country Programme implementation during the first half of the programme cycle 2017 – 2020, some key lessons were identified:

### **One, the need for a broad programme structure to accommodate emerging government needs**

The three programme outcomes - integrated early childhood development; the protection of children from violence; and the inclusion of children with disabilities - while relevant, limited UNICEF Oman support to early childhood and children in need of special protection. The country's emerging priorities and the Government's requests did not always fit within this structure. For example, focusing on integrated early childhood development and inclusive education did not contribute to mainstream education. Yet, government requests were clear that such support was needed in a few strategic and catalytic areas to improve learning outcomes and employability, given the importance of Omanisation and Tanfeedh (an initiative to diversify national income resources).

### **Two, the need to refocus activities**

Overall, the work of the programme management group, proposed by UNICEF Oman and established by ministerial decree, was instrumental in resolving obstacles in programme implementation. Formed of representatives from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Development, and the National Centre for Statistics and Information, the programme management group takes a holistic approach to the country programme, promoting cross-sectoral linkages and facilitating the endorsement of progressive interventions. Nonetheless, more progress could have been realized if a more focused and strategic selection of activities was endorsed, building on UNICEF's added value in high-income countries. Selected activities would need to have the potential for maximum impact, synergy, scalability and sustainability.

### **Three, cross-cutting challenges**

It was recognized that in many areas, appropriate policies and laws were largely in place and that access was not a problem for mainstream services. Rather, bottlenecks were related to: 1) weak implementation of existing policies and programmes; 2) specific gaps in laws, policies and regulatory frameworks affecting children; 3) inadequate quality of services – especially at sub-national levels; 4) sub-optimal planning and data systems, and therefore, a lack of effective planning, targeting and robust disaggregated data; and 5) behaviour and practices that are not conducive to the realisation of child rights.

### **Four, the added value of UNICEF Oman in a high-income country lies in innovative approaches and ideas, which the Government could then take to scale**

As such, UNICEF Oman must use some independent "seed" funding for introducing interventions and providing Government with relevant evidence. In this regard, allocating some of the Global Thematic Funds in Education to UNICEF Oman was highly appropriate and effective. Other sectors will need such allocations as well.

The need to strengthen national capacities is considerable and should not be underestimated

(regardless of Oman's high-income country status). As most UNICEF Oman interventions involve innovative approaches, there is a need for appropriate technical assistance in operating or scaling up initiatives. UNICEF Oman will continue providing support to capacity building in these new areas. In addition, to ensure sustainability of capacity building initiatives, it is essential that they became institutional in universities and ministry's training institutes.

Taking into consideration lessons learned, it was decided to broaden the scope of the country programme in 2019, also focusing on a number of well-defined and strategically-selected areas that synergize with government-funded interventions, with the aim to be more upstream. UNICEF Oman's added value thus lies in its global experience and convening ability to identify and call upon the required technical expertise and knowledge as necessary and in the highest quality possible.

Accordingly programme strategies were consolidated from six to four:

**1. Social behavioural-change communication:** The Government and private sector partners should be supported in the social behavioural-change communication strategy to address issues linked to demand, knowledge and behaviour, such as inappropriate young child feeding, unhygienic practices by care givers, violence against children and boys dropping out of school. Social behavioural-change communication should engage communities and the public at all levels, and through a variety of channels, including television and inter-personal channels. Extensive use of the internet and mobile technologies offer new opportunities.

**2. Institutional strengthening:** Special support should be provided to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency and timely impact of institutional performance. There is a need to encourage: a) joint initiatives on children's issues by sectoral ministries, to move away from verticality, to achieve synergy and ensure an integrated multi-sectoral response to key child concerns, and b) sustainability of robust, in-depth building and upgrading of professional capacities in domains closely related to children's welfare.

**3. Evidence-based policy analysis and advocacy:** Advocacy needs a strategic plan in support of the country programme goals and targets, but with its own goals and milestones for influencing policy development and resource allocation. Strategically-prepared study tours for decision-makers can influence programmes and policy in Oman. South-South and triangular cooperation should be promoted, with care given in selecting countries, taking into account the numerous achievements of the Sultanate. In 2018, two successful study tours were organized to New York City and Jordan.

**4. Strategic partnerships for children to elevate children's issues to a higher level:** Prior to 2018, UNICEF Oman had limited experience with partnerships beyond the three-line ministries of Social Development, Health and Education and the National Centre for Statistics and Information. As outlined above, UNICEF started new partnerships with the State Council, the Ministry of Higher Education, and academic and research institutions. Partnerships with the private sector and non-government organizations were also established.

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