

Update on the context and situation of children

Uzbekistan has a population of over 33.5 million, approximately 10 million of them children.

The State allocates more than 55% of national budget to social sector expenditures, exceeding 10% of GDP with investing in children accounting for 78% of these expenditures. Key challenges with public investments for children are: low per-child public expenditures, unknown direct impact on children, and little allocation to inclusive policies. With estimated several million Uzbeks working abroad, remittances—as an important source of income for some families—were estimated to comprise 9% of total GDP in 2018.

Since 2006, the number of households receiving child benefits has shrunk by 70%. The coverage of social security for children is mainly indirect, thus, only 17% of children aged 0-17 live in a household that receives any of the three existing child allowances. Entitlement to child benefit ceases at 14, when children leave basic education. It is estimated that 42% (66% women and 34% men) of young people are neither in employment, nor in education or training (NEET).

The national poverty rate (measured by less than 2100 kcal per person per day) in 2016 was 12.3% with three-quarters of people in poverty living in rural areas. The current social protection system does not effectively protect families with children from poverty: about 30% of the children up to 9 years and 24% of the children aged 5-14 years live in families from the poorest quintiles.

Uzbekistan scores well in the most important survival and development indicators. However, the survival rate of babies is worrying: of all under-5 deaths about 50% occur in the first 28 days of life. Stillbirth has significantly increased in recent years. The quality of health services in antenatal care and high-risk pregnancy care poses major challenges. The organization and management of the health system is sub-optimal, leading to overcrowding in some parts of the health system and thus to challenges in the quality of care provided to mothers and children. There are significant regional differences both in specific indicators and in the assessment of the quality of health facilities.

Despite reported good coverage of immunization (above 95%), outbreaks of measles and meningitis in 2019 confirm weaknesses of the immunization programme. The nutritional status of non-pregnant women and of children also present major challenges: 15% of children suffer from anaemia, over 50% face iron deficiency and 6% face vitamin A deficiency. Children are still dying from easily preventable causes, thus investment in nutrition strategies, prevention of communicable diseases and strengthening the health system remains relevant. While the vertical transmission of HIV from mothers to babies has reduced, HIV/AIDS is now one of the causes of death that has increased most among children.

Suicide rate is rising, especially among the 15-19 age group, yet mental health services are heavily dependent on specialized services located in traditional institutions. The quality of the workforce, outdated pre- and in-service medical education and lack of well-established HMIS, are the underlying causes to many of the problems of the health and immunization systems.

Since 2017, important and ambitious reforms are introduced in sub-sectors of education. The government has placed the quality of education and learning outcomes at the centre of reforms, also aiming at expanding pre-schools to achieve 100% enrolment by 2021. Although pre-school education has increased, it is low, at 48% in 2018/2019. Differences in enrolment ratios between primary and secondary levels indicate that children may drop out or repeat classes between primary and secondary levels. In 2017, there were 33,000 children and 108,000 adolescents out of school, of whom 60% were girls and a large majority is thought to be children with disabilities. The education system in Uzbekistan needs to be further strengthened to achieve optimal outcomes in terms of learning, social inclusion and citizenship. The quality of GSE and learning outcomes of students remain highly variable and inequitable: a comprehensive and nationally representative learning achievement study in 2018 showed that students performed average compared to expected for their grade and that the pace of learning in primary grades was low. In 2015, a total of 17,960 children studied in special schools and boarding schools for the special education. However, only 35% of children in special schools had official disability-status.

Uzbekistan has taken significant steps to align its legislative framework and child protection practices with international standards. The age of marriage for girls is increased to 18 and establishment of a Deputy Ombudsperson on Child Rights is being considered. Though child marriage—mainly affecting girls—is declining, there were 4,787 such marriages reported in 2018.

Despite some progress in deinstitutionalization policy and adoption of a related action plan, residential care facilities are still the dominant alternative care option. The rate of children living in residential care institutions is 255 per 100,000 child population, over twice the global average rate. Children with disabilities are over-represented and in 2016 accounted for 84% of all children in institutions. On the other hand, children of migrant workers are often left in informal kinship care,

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thus not registered by statutory bodies; as a result, their well-being is not always monitored.

Uzbekistan does not have a separate juvenile justice system. Existing criminal legislation does not protect the rights of victims and witnesses of crimes in justice processes. Children below the minimum age of criminal responsibility (ranging from 13 to 16, depending on type of crime) may be deprived of liberty up to three years. A recent assessment showed that the so-called 'antisocial behaviour' that led children being placed in closed educational institutions was often triggered by a difficult atmosphere in the family, discrimination, violence and lack of care, poor relationships between family members, and lack of material opportunities.

Despite legislative provisions, there is no mechanisms to support meaningful participation of children starting from a family environment. The participation of children and young people in decision-making and social movements remains limited. The vulnerability of young people is reflected in the high NEET rate, mental health problems and suicide rates, as well as in the patterns of high labour migration in young people.

Several data sources show that there are increases in divorce rates, child separation rates and the use of services for women subjected to domestic violence.

Earthquake and flood remain to be major natural phenomena posing potential risks to survival and well-being of children.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Every Child Survives and Thrives

In 2019, Government of Uzbekistan continued reforming the health sector. UNICEF, together with WHO, was engaged in this process to ensure reforms result in improved service delivery for children. For instance, because of UNICEF advocacy, the plan to separate the sanitary-epidemiological services (including immunization) from the Ministry of Health (MOH) which could have negatively affected coverage of vaccination due to weak coordination and reduced resources, was reversed. Additionally, a new Department of Logistics and Procurement to guarantee uninterrupted availability of safe vaccines for children was established under the Agency for Sanitary and Epidemiological Wellbeing. To compliment this, the planning and budgeting tool for vaccine procurement was revised and now includes a module on cold chain equipment maintenance. This has been formally adopted by MOH and the Ministry of Finance. Cold chain capacity at regional and district levels was increased significantly allowing safe storage of nine different types of vaccines for more than 750 000 children. With support from GAVI, all 12 regions of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Karakalpakstan were equipped with newly constructed cold chain stores and cold rooms and their staff were trained on use of advanced equipment and technology. These efforts will help maintain the coverage of vaccination in the country at its high level.

UNICEF supported MOH to introduce Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine among 9-year-old girls which reached a coverage of 96 percent. This was achieved despite the antivaccination movements which were very strong especially in larger cities. To overcome vaccination resistance, UNICEF together with WHO supported development and implementation of a communication strategy that encouraged political commitment, multi-sectorial cooperation, and visible endorsement by national, regional and district government leaders.

UNICEF continued modelling of district health system strengthening (DHSS) through evidence-based and equity-focused health care quality improvement plans and developed step-by-step implementation guidelines to ensure future scale-up of the DHSS. Government agreed with UNICEF recommendations for introduction of an electronic system for birth and death registration in Uzbekistan starting 2020. This will ensure information exchange among responsible government ministries and agencies, and effective analysis of indicators recommended by WHO. This way causes of children's death can be registered and monitored accurately, gaps in the systems and services identified and corrective measures put in place to reduce death from preventable causes.

To reduce new-born preventable deaths, UNICEF supported MOH by adoption and implementation of perinatal audit, revision of four neonatal care standards, revision of in-service neonatal care curriculum and training of instructors in medical schools. UNICEF also supported MOH in modelling of universal-progressive home visiting system in eight primary health care facilities located in three most deprived regions. This approach to home visiting has enabled nurses to effectively identify danger signs, raise awareness of parents on these signs and provide consultation, and refer severe cases to higher-level healthcare services. This approach increases efficiency and in the long run improves quality of healthcare and reduce occurrence of serious illnesses causing mortality.

UNICEF supported MOH in conducting a nationwide nutrition survey which shows progress on reduction of stunting in Uzbekistan. However, micronutrient deficiencies in children and women at reproductive age are identified to be problems that need to be addressed. UNICEF's advocacy has resulted in government's decision to develop a nutrition strategy and

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action plan to reduce micronutrient deficiency, based on results of the nutrition survey. With UNICEF's advocacy and technical support, a Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and Infant and Young Child Food is adopted by Government of Uzbekistan.

Jointly with UNFPA and WHO, UNICEF conducted a situation analysis on adolescent health and is in the process of developing a multi-sectorial adolescent health strategy and action plan.

UNICEF supported the Government to conduct pre-validation of elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/Syphilis. International experts on data, program, human rights and laboratories visited the country and provided concrete recommendations on the way forward to eliminate mother to child transmission of HIV/syphilis.

As part of efforts to promote South-South cooperation, UNICEF coordinated a study visit of four countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia region to Thailand to learn from their experience of validation of elimination of mother to child transmission of HIV/syphilis. UNICEF Uzbekistan also invited experts from Kazakhstan to share experience on home visiting.

Every Child Learns

In 2019, UNICEF played an instrumental role in resource mobilization for expansion of preschool education in Uzbekistan. UNICEF supported development of the second Education Sector Plan (ESP) of Uzbekistan, 2019-2023. The ESP approved by Global Partnership for Education (GPE) made access of education sector possible to more than USD 70 million in external aid: a GPE multiplier grant of USD 10 million complemented with a World Bank project of more than USD 60 million. Other development agencies and donors, for instance the Asian Development Bank, UNESCO and USAID are also using the ESP for planning their support for education sector.

In December 2019, the Senate approved the Law on Preschool Education. The Law was drafted by the Ministry of Preschool Education (MOPSE) with extensive technical support from UNICEF. The Law defines the rights of children to Early Childhood Education (ECE) and the directions of state policy in ECE. The Law guarantees the right of every child to receive one year of compulsory pre-primary education in state-run preschools. This is an important achievement as until now preschool was a voluntary and paid service in Uzbekistan. UNICEF also supported the government to increase access to ECE services: strong advocacy, complemented with technical assistance to MOPSE has resulted in designing various forms of Public-Private Partnership as well as the alternative ECE models; such as family-based, multi-level multi-age groups. Among these, the one year free and compulsory pre-primary education is now modelled in several regions by the government. UNICEF will be modelling the other alternatives in selected regions in 2020 to assess effectiveness and efficiency of each.

UNICEF has been supporting curriculum and pedagogical reforms in the country. In 2019, UNICEF supported MOPE to develop the first ever National Curriculum Framework (NCF) outlining the competency-based approach to curriculum. The NCF, for the first time in the country, specifies not only the general outcomes expected from education, but also breaks them down into specific annual competency outcomes. The NCF also defines the pedagogical and assessment frameworks. This will help improve the quality of learning/teaching in schools. UNICEF has also initiated a review of textbook policies in the country and developed recommendations for aligning them with the NCF and improving their quality. As for the preschool curriculum, UNICEF supported the training of a core team of National Master Trainers in delivering preschool curriculum and Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS), who in turn have so far trained 38,400 preschool teachers in cascade mode. The ELDS was developed and revised in earlier years with UNICEF support, too.

In 2019, UNICEF supported the government in drafting the new Teacher Qualification Frameworks and Teacher Professional Standards. This redefines expectations from teachers and brings their qualifications in line with educational reform. It also sets the standards for teacher re/training. UNICEF also supported development of Education Quality Assurance Framework (EQAF), including its instruments and guidelines. This framework helps government measure different aspects of quality of education to improve delivery.

UNICEF has been supporting the Government in developing education management information systems (EMIS). The preschool EMIS developed with UNICEF support is now facilitating systematic tracking and monitoring of facilities, preschool applications and enrolments, all disaggregated by gender, location and pre-school types.

In 2019, UNICEF demonstrated the use of research and evidence for informing policy and improving education quality and accountability through two researches. UNICEF-MOPE joint assessment of learning outcomes in grade IV, provides for the first-time evidence on learning levels in the country. This study clearly demonstrated the relative impact of different factors affecting the quality of education in Uzbekistan. The study provides government with crucial information for evidence-based policy reform and programming. UNICEF also completed a study on Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) of parents and

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communities with respect to: (i) demand for preschool education; (ii) participation in school-based management and (iii) disaster risk reduction and safe behaviour. These studies will inform government and development partners' programmes in coming years.

Every Child is Protected from Violence and Exploitation

In line with the UN Guidelines for Alternative Care of Children, UNICEF supported the Government of Uzbekistan with development of a long-term action plan and programme on de-institutionalization which was later approved by the Cabinet of Ministers in September 2019. This was in response to the Presidential Resolution of February for strengthening measures to prevent separation of children from families and creating alternatives to the residential care institutions. This will shift the approach away from placing children in institutions to family-type care and prevent unnecessary separation of children from their families.

UNICEF continued to advocate for introduction of social work as a key pillar into the system of social services workforce. In the reporting period, the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education approved the curriculum of a four-year bachelor's degree on social work in universities and a four-month short-term training programme on social work for practitioners which were developed with UNICEF support. The Government changed its policy approach to defining important statutory positions and competencies and to delivering specialised social services to vulnerable families within the requirements of the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance.

This year, the Government also paid greater attention to justice for children in the context of justice sector reform. Along with drafting amendments to the Criminal Code in April 2019, UNICEF supported the Prosecutor General's Office to launch an innovative project on Modelling Diversion with Restorative Justice in one district of Tashkent city. During the implementation phase, diversionary measures were used in fifty percent of the cases referred to this district.

A system level breakthrough led to wider reform of the juvenile justice system in Uzbekistan. UNICEF's joint work with the Prosecutor General's Office in 2018-2019 resulted in the adoption of the Presidential Resolution of May 2019 calling for the closure of two out of four closed specialized educational facilities. The minimum age for referrals to these facilities was raised from 11 to 14 years and additional positions for psychologists were established in the remaining institutions. This is a major step towards fulfilling the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to Uzbekistan, particularly on reforming the juvenile justice system.

Responding to the needs of returned children from armed conflict zones, a joint action plan between UNICEF and the Government was adopted in June 2019 which ensured the long-term support and reintegration of returnees into their families and communities. In the framework of this programme, UNICEF trained 35 professionals and service providers to apply a case management approach to all repatriated children from Syria and Iraq. This ensured psycho-social support for 108 children during reintegration into their families and communities of origin. The programme which was implemented in coordination among three UNICEF Offices and two UNICEF Regional Offices is a good example of strong South-South Cooperation.

Every Child Has an Equitable Chance in Life

In 2019 UNICEF provided technical support to Government for integrated institutional design for social protection system. Government and UNICEF jointly drafted a decree on establishment of the state body on social protection which was submitted to the President's Office for approval and in support of this initiative, UNICEF led UN joint efforts to mobilize resources to support the Government in establishing the single state body/coordination mechanism for social protection in 2020-2021.

Benefiting from analytical work and the microsimulation tool developed in 2018, UNICEF launched the child benefit reform advocacy, engaging with high-level stakeholders such as Parliament, ministries of Finance, and Labour, and Women's Committee to promote the reforms. Considering that Uzbekistan is the World Bank's human capital pilot country, UNICEF also initiated a high-level policy dialogue with the World Bank to develop a common vision and pathway towards universal social protection in Uzbekistan.

Based on the concept developed in 2018, the Ministry of Finance and UNICEF launched a pilot of a single registry for social protection, an integrated management information system, in Syrdariya region. The system entails end-to-end digitization of processes for applying, assigning and paying social allowances, including child benefits.

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UNICEF continued its efforts on making social protection system more resilient and shock responsive through building the government's capacity on utilizing the existing cash transfer mechanisms for humanitarian cash transfers in emergencies.

Government and civil society organizations' capacity to monitor the situation of youth to inform decision making has been increased through comprehensive situation analysis of young people supported by UNICEF and four regional youth consultations with local authorities and expansion of U-Report.

UNICEF jointly with the Youth Union and Nationwide Movement 'Yuksalish' ('Progress' in Uzbek) conducted first ever nationally representative youth survey on their aspirations, needs and risks. In 2020, the findings will be used to inform the State Youth Policy and programmes.

To promote youth participation in decision-making, UNICEF jointly with Yuksalish conducted 4 regional youth consultations with the local governors in three regions. In total 123 young people, 66 females and 57 males, participated in consultations. Several solutions proposed by young people, including establishment of career centres at universities, book corners at airports and railway stations to promote reading, and campaign on raising ecological awareness, were adopted by local authorities for joint implementation. One of the participants was invited for an internship at the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan to further develop his prototype of the sowing robot to plant trees in the area affected by the Aral Sea environmental disaster.

Following successful launch and rapid growth of U-Report in 2018, in 2019 eight regional outreach campaigns took place to engage young people from the most remote areas into a dialogue with decision-makers at national level. At the end of 2019, number of U-Reporters exceeded 38,000. Seven Youth Committees have been created throughout the Republic with more than 200 young people actively volunteering and promoting youth participation.

To raise awareness on the importance of youth participation and to enhance capacity of the national partners in engagement of young people in the development and implementation of youth policy, UNICEF facilitated first ever official participation of the Chairman of the Youth Union and young people in the UN ECOSOC Youth Forum. Such exposure has contributed to a shift in approaches to youth engagement and understanding of importance of providing voice and opportunities for the most marginalized young people.

Child Rights Monitoring and Evidence Generation

UNICEF completed ten major researches and studies in 2019 which form the basis of its policy advocacy for child rights (See details of some in other parts of the report.). The comprehensive Situation Analysis of Children in Uzbekistan compiled data and information from various sources including UNICEF, reviewed manifestations and causes of child rights deprivations and built a basis for a public discourse on realization of children's rights.

Following UNICEF advocacy, the country submitted the 5th National Report to the UN CRC in April 2019 opening the window for critical discussions around the child rights implementation in Uzbekistan.

Gender Equality

UNICEF's strategy in Uzbekistan is to address gender inequalities through mainstreaming gender into its programmes. To this end, in all researches and studies conducted in 2019, gender differences were explored to help programme more effectively. These studies highlight that there are significant gaps between legislation and social norms and customary practices, patriarchal and hierarchical family structures, strong gender norms, stigma and discriminatory norms perpetuate and aggravate deprivations for children.

For illustration purposes, in re-integration of children in specialized educational institutions into families and communities, development of the NCF, drafting of the Law on Preschool Education, development of the multi-sectorial adolescent health strategy, and introduction of HPV vaccine gender sensitive programming played an important role in ensuring rights of boys and girls are equally fulfilled.

Communications

UNICEF has used communication as a strategy to enhance delivering results for children: for instance, creating demand for services or influencing communities to adopt positive behaviours (Please, see above)

To understand the media habits of young people and decision makers in the country, UNICEF completed the media study, which will help develop more effective communication strategies.

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Social media platforms were activated with regular posting of children's issues and UNICEF's actions. This has led to increase in number of followers and better engagement. Total number of followers of UNICEF's social media accounts have reached a figure of 9,785. UNICEF Country Office's website is now available in Uzbek, Russian and English.

The State of the World Children's report was launched simultaneously with the National Nutrition Survey report to advocate for the nutritional rights of children of Uzbekistan.

To commemorate the 30th anniversary, UNICEF organized the National Summit for Children on television, where vulnerable children and their champions came face to face with high-level Government officials. Children and young people held them accountable for their rights and their engagement created a popular TV show. Children and young people also took-over UNICEF and UN, as well as Hyatt Regency, a private sector organization and engaged with their management.

UNICEF rolled out campaigns to end violence against children and equal rights for girls to address issues that have been seldom discussed on public platforms.

Governance

UNICEF is increasingly focusing and assuring the best use of UNICEF assets and resources in alignment with programme goals. UNICEF Operations has minimized operational infrastructure costs by market analysis and subsequent negotiation with stakeholders to free up funds to spend directly on programmes. Bank commission costs are now reduced with a 20 per cent saving from the prior year, and a negotiated change of mobile tariffs led to savings of 30 percent.

The supply management processes were redesigned to support value for money programmatic implementation. Establishing long term arrangements, for instance in printing services. Robust competitive negotiations based on Best and final Offer led to USD 280,000 of savings.

UNICEF programs were supported by Technology for Development solutions. For instance, in-house expertise helped develop an electronic platform to enhance the quality assurance system for the education sector.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Lessons Learnt

During the current country programme UNICEF has been actively engaged with government in creating an enabling environment for fulfilling and promoting rights of children. A considerable number of laws, policies and programmes have been revised or developed with UNICEF support. UNICEF experience in the country has shown that without pairing such efforts with well-planned capacity development exercises during and after reforms, change might not come easily. The improved policy and programme environments require competent staff to sustain them throughout the reform process. The capacity development interventions can vary from direct training of staff, to facilitating exposure to international best practices or handholding during the reform process. Introduction of management information systems, curriculum reform, and introduction of a national assessment system in education are examples where combined implementation strategies have been crucial for success.

In major change processes where bottlenecks and barriers present themselves not only as gaps in enabling environment and capacity of duty bearers, but also in social norms, a comprehensive impact strategy and advocacy plan needs to be developed to support the change process. For example, despite the President's call to renew approaches towards young people, and UNICEF's ongoing advocacy and initiatives on youth engagement, policy development and implementation remains centralized and top-down.

UNICEF has been successful in inclusion of child protection agenda in the policy of the Government at national level. However, while a systemic approach is important, the development and provision of services at family level are mutually reinforcing. Throughout 2019, interaction between UNICEF and district authorities has not only confirmed that services at local level must be strengthened, but also that demand for services and awareness of families and children needs to be increased in parallel. This requires involving communities and civil society in increasing awareness of children's rights, as well as changes to social norms that prevent the separation of children from a family environment.

One of the programmes supported by UNICEF, namely establishment of an effective coordination mechanism in social protection was challenged by political disagreement and differences of opinion on urgency and timing as well as its

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structure and main functions. Main lesson learnt has been that a very wide range of national partners and development actors should always be involved in the discussions and consultations.

Generating evidence and using findings of studies in advocating for policy and programme reforms has been instrumental beyond expectation. UNICEF completed a good number of studies in the reporting period, such as the National Learning Assessment Study or the National Nutrition Survey. The findings of the first study were very much expected by UNICEF and therefore did not fundamentally affect its programme, however, they had considerable impact in increasing ownership of the Programme by Government and trust in UNICEF cooperation. In health sector, nutrition programme gained higher level of prominence in Government programmes and stronger ownership once results of the national survey were disseminated.

In fast-paced reform contexts like that of Uzbekistan, remaining responsive to diverse and increasing demands by partners, and at the same time staying focused on results is a major challenge. At initial stages of such reforms, agility and responsiveness play an important role, however, once trust is built, it is time to decide more selectively on areas of strategic interventions. This shift requires a good understanding of the development context and the political economy combined with calculated risk taking.

Innovations

Introduction of the Single Registry is an example of innovation in integration of social protection system and more effective delivery of social protection programmes. Integrating the single registry with databases of such agencies as Tax Committee, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations allowed instant verifications of the applications. It enabled the Government to replace the current practice of paper-based and subjective community targeting with more transparent and efficient means of testing based on verifiable criteria. Eventually, bringing all social protection programmes into the Single Registry will enable it to become an effective case management tool for social workers and relevant ministries.

Representative and valid data in development programming is important, but not always available. Lack of information can pose challenges for the success of programmes. To design and implement campaigns on violence and gender equality, when there is limited data, UNICEF developed campaigns based on voices of young people. U-reporters were called upon to send their views and campaigns were rolled out based on their perceptions.

In the reporting period, UNICEF developed a conceptual framework for alternative and innovative preschool programmes. The one-year pre-primary schools are already modelled by MOPSE. The preschools using Public Private Partnership models were also designed with UNICEF's technical inputs. For the first time in the country, the concept and tools for self-assessment of educational institutions were introduced alongside external assessment. Uzbekistan national educational assessment system has always been based on traditional non-standardized testing methodologies. With UNICEF support, new tools and methods in line with international best practices were introduced, making analysis based on multi-variate models possible.