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Update on the context and situation of children

Tunisia is currently standing on a cross-road. Important democratic gains were made in 2019 with the peaceful and democratic elections of a new President and Parliament, albeit deeply fragmented. The constitutional court is still not established and the emergency law remains in effect. After months of negotiations, a new government is expected to be in place shortly. Despite a caregiver government, overall implementation of programmes has slowed down and affecting the provisions of basic social services.

By casting their votes, the Tunisian population sent a strong signal for the need to break away from the existing system, and to put an end to the intra-elite quarrels that have been impacting on the institutions' effectiveness and pave the way for a new social contract and development model. The change within the political scene has boosted citizen's moral and brought a renewed sense of hope into the country. These watershed events were contrasted by sluggish economic growth and inability for the country to effect major reforms, a continuation of low-intensity terrorist attacks against security forces and major national tragedies (numbers of children endured abuse and violence within learning facilities; the death of infants at a maternity ward and a traffic incident caused by human neglect and poor control mechanisms and resulting in huge losses of young people lives) that were illustrative of the decay in social services in the country. On the other hand, Tunisia has generally shielded itself from the political risks and deep civil strife and unrests witnessed in neighborhood countries. The ongoing, unpredictable security threats continue to exist in Tunisia, exacerbated by substantial regional spillovers. Existing social and economic exclusion among lower- and middle-income households remains an impediment to stabilizing these threats. In the absence of bold measures, Tunisia's short-term economic and social outlook remains particularly dim. While Tunisia has several social protection and labor programs in place, its ability to respond to increasing social needs is compromised by inefficiency, fragmentation, and inequity. Against this backdrop, the realization of children's rights is increasing facing challenges as the results of Multi Indicator Cluster Survey 6 (MICS6) conducted in 2018 by the Institute of National Statistics and launched in 2019 have revealed. The government implementation of international financial institutions supported social sectors programmes encountered significant delays, frequent changes in leadership and in technical positions within government, the conduct of elections and the numerous social and political tensions have particularly affected the implementation of national programmes notably in health, education and child protection.

Though some notable progress was noted in 2019: with the submission of the SDGs Voluntary National Report; the participation of adolescents and NGOs to the UN pre session at the Committee on the Rights of the Child on one hand. On the economic front, Tunisia's foreign reserves improved thanks to the increase in tourism and agriculture exports. There has been a tighter monetary policy of the central bank and management of the inflation [\[1\]](#) from 7.3% in 2018 to 6.6% in 2019, the overall economic growth further declined from 2.4% in 2018 to 1.5% in 2019. Although a control of the budget deficit was partially managed, it still reached 3.5% of GDP due to the huge public payroll and high level of service debt (89% of GDP). In a context of a widening sub regional fragility, fragile political and economic situation within the country, and slow progress in realizing structural reforms, the quality of basic social services further impoverished.

The high unemployment rate 15.3% has further fueled discontent amongst youth but also motivated them to massively vote during the presidential elections. There is an urgent need to create jobs in the country. However, this will not be achievable if the current education system, both general and technical, does not respond to the needs of the job market. The performance of the education system, as underlined by MICS6, shows alarming signs of strangulation for a system which used to rank well above the education systems of other middle-income countries. This is especially the case at the level of secondary school with only 49% of adolescents graduating from high school, on average 100,000 out of school adolescents in a given school year, and 50,000 students at risk of dropping out. Whereas in 2011, 72% of students passed the final baccalaureate exam, in 2018 this percentage dropped to 42%. The vocational/technical education system is not aligned to the job market nor attractive to adolescents disappointed with the general education system. The government, the private sector and citizens are increasingly recognizing that the well-known and praised education system has not been delivering learning outcomes for children including adolescents. Further the historical, economic and social legacies of the exclusion of the southern and interior regions, and rural versus urban contexts, have continued to weigh heavily on the existing regional inequalities as pointed out by MICS6 data. Only 49% of children aged 3-5 years, mainly from the richest and urban quintiles, attend early childhood development programmes, whilst the non-participation to pre-primary education is recognized as a key factor causing low learning achievement and school drop-out. Provision of pre-primary education is highly fragmented between rural and urban and with over 60% availed by the private sector. Ensuring a generalization of the access and the quality of the offer is a key challenge, requiring engagement with all stakeholders, public and private. MICS6 also revealed that immunization rates are faltering, especially amongst poor and rural children, and there is an increasingly concerning lack of harmonization between the public and private sector's vaccination records. Violence against children aged 1-14 years saw a slight decline from 93% (MICS4) to 88% (MICS6). The social and political tensions, the economic instability, and deepening inequalities are likely to be amongst the main risks to have significant impact on vulnerable people (17% (2 million) of the population) especially children. The new President and

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Members of Parliament have committed to increase investments in human development and social protection schemes. By late 2019, some development partners have also started looking to adjust their development programmes.

[1](#) Economic data from WB economic update 10/19 and IMF Staff report 06/19

Major contributions and drivers of results

2019 saw the first year of implementation of the life cycle approach by UNICEF and its partners. The MICS6 underlined that only 49% of 3-5 years old in Tunisia benefit from pre-primary education, even though this is recognised as a key factor causing low learning achievement and school drop-out. Thanks to UNICEF's support, all five years old in Tunisia (both in private and public establishments) are in 2019 following the same pre-primary curriculum and 4,200 teachers (public and private) and inspectors benefited from in-service training to effectively implement the new curriculum. This is in line with the Government's Multisectoral Strategy for Early Childhood Development (developed and adopted in 2017 with technical support from UNICEF and the World Bank) and in line with axis 3 of the UNDAF. Thanks to technical support and advocacy by UNICEF, a new bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education, and the first of its kind in Tunisia, was launched in September 2019 with a first cohort of over 120 students enrolled and contributing to professionalising educators for young children.

Over the course of 2019, the design of quality standards for preschool services, started in 2018, has been finalized, with the validation of the 3 standards for development and equipment, management, and teaching practices by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Seniors (MFFES), and the Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity (UTSS). Three reference centres modelling the infrastructure, equipment and management standards were opened in November 2019 in two of Tunisia's poorest regions and in Tunis' urban area, with a capacity to accommodate 120 children each. The centres will serve as a replicable model of quality preschool education. In addition to providing early childhood services, the reference centres will serve as a site for internships for future preschool educators, continuing education for professionals, and positive parenting education sessions for parents. The centres will also be open to private sector professionals to identify good practices and replicate them in their structures. In addition, an information system was put in place on preschool in 2019, enabling the strengthening of data collection, planning and decision-making by the Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood and Seniors, with work in progress for the extension of the system to others concerned by preschool as well as parents. A multisectoral study on the state of knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP study) of parents of children aged 0-6 was finalized in July 2019, serving as evidence for the development of a national multisectoral positive parenting programme which will be launched in 2020. It is to be noted in this regard that according to the MICS6, 88% of children aged 1-14 years old in Tunisia are exposed to violent discipline.

In 2019, UNICEF has continued to support the life-skills and competency-based curriculum reform resulting in the review on 3 curricula at the secondary level (computing, technology and economy) and their implementation in the classroom, and important progress was made on the revision of the primary years' curricula. Several efforts were further put in place to strengthen the role of the educational inspectors in view of improve the quality of teaching. Among others, regional meetings were organized by the Ministry of Education, enabling approximately 500 additional educational managers to be trained in the analysis of practices.

UNICEF is contributing to the ongoing decentralisation process through the establishment of 26 budgeted regional education plans and capacity development. Importantly, the Ministry of Education decided to use the future 26 regional plans to feed into the development of the next Five-Year Plan (2021-2025).

The first cohort of 2,450 teachers graduated from the bachelor's degree in applied education sciences, put in place with support from UNICEF, were assigned to various schools. Strong donor coordination, thanks to UNICEF's convening role, led to the delivery of summer training for 10,000 teachers (7% of total) and the development of a joint plan to strengthen the capacities of teachers and non-teaching staff on life-skills and citizenship education, in line with axis 3 of the UNDAF and of importance given that the quality of education in Tunisia is greatly suffering from the lack of pre- and in-service teacher training.

2019 marked important progress, in line with the Gen U initiative, in the development of an innovative "second chance" education model for out-of-school adolescents aged between 12 and 18 years old. As outlined by the MICS6, school drop-out rates are high in Tunisia with only 49% of adolescents finishing secondary school. The second chance centres will first provide individual guidance in a so-called one stop centre to each adolescent seeking assistance. The support will consist of counselling, help to define a learning or training project, assess the adolescent's current level of competencies and the provision of other services that are relevant to each adolescent, girls and boys (such as health care, extra-curricular activities, etc.). Should the adolescent require more time to build their learning/professional project and/or strengthen their life skills, each one will be able to benefit from a 6 to 9 months customized second chance educational programme to be able to either return to mainstream education, enroll in vocational training or start a transition to the job market for the

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16+. All preparatory steps to implement the programme in two Centres operated by the public and private sector respectively have been completed with opening expected in early 2020. The strong inter-ministerial partnership forged by UNICEF as part of this intervention between the ministries of education, employment and vocational training and social affairs, the Tunisian Agency for Vocational Training and the involvement of the private sector, is applauded by Government partners as a best practice coordination example. It is expected that the second chance initiative will serve as a model for much larger scale replication, and as such will represent a response to the 10% of adolescents aged 15-19 years old in Tunisia in NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). It is also to be noted that the initiative serves a protection rationale as this age group represents 84% of informal work in Tunisia.

As an important milestone, as part of the intervention to combat school dropout and failure, the general architecture of the school dropout prevention model was finalised in partnership with the ministries of education, health and social affairs. The model was validated in September 2019 and presented in a restitution workshop in October 2019. A tool to identify students at risk of dropping out has been designed by the Ministry of Education with the support of an expert firm supported by UNICEF. This tool is being tested in 9 pilot sites from October 2019 onwards, identified based on school dropout statistics from the Ministry of Education. The 9 establishments include primary schools, middle- and high-schools in six Governorates, covering rural and urban areas. The tool is mainly based on existing administrative data produced by teaching teams in schools (grades, absenteeism, disciplinary sanctions, repeating grades). The index is built based on 3 predictors of dropout: repetition, school results and attitude in the school environment. In addition, local and regional dropout prevention committees were formed in the 6 pilot regions; The regional committees, chaired by the regional education commissioners, are made up of regional collaborators from other relevant sectors (health, social affairs, the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Seniors, civil society organizations, etc.).

Further, to help prevent school drop-out, improved WASH infrastructure was delivered and handed over in 11 schools, and health and hygiene education was delivered at 34 schools, reaching a total of 10,036 children in schools at risk. Jointly developed by the Ministries of Education and Health, with technical support from UNICEF, training manuals for hygiene education were adopted by the Ministry of Education for distribution to 1.6 million students nationwide in 2020. In addition, also jointly designed by the Ministries of Education and Health, with technical support from UNICEF, standards for WASH infrastructure in schools were developed. An important lesson learned in this regard was the added benefit of bringing in architect expertise for the development of the new WASH infrastructure standards and their modelling. From a one-UN perspective, important success was booked as part of this intervention, as the provision of a water tank at a school in the disadvantaged region of Kasserine by UNICEF enabled WFP to establish a canteen at that same location, due to start operating in January 2020.

In line with axis 3 of the UNDAF, important steps forward were taken by the Tunisian authorities in efforts to reduce hardship among 21.2% of children that live below the poverty line while improving targetting and efficiency in existing social programmes and ensuring the financial sustainability of the social security system, including to help the middle class. At the end of 2019 and following high level policy advocacy efforts and provision of technical expertise, and convening south- south cooperation by UNICEF, the Government submitted a draft law on the social protection floor. The law also includes the establishment of an universal cash grant for all children in Tunisia.

Important progress was also made in 2019 with the strengthening of the institutional framework for improved coordination on justice for children issues. The unit for the coordination of children's access to justice was staffed in September 2019, progress was made on the identification of two police stations for the establishment of child protection police units in Kasserine Governorate, and the key stakeholders agreed on a range of support and outreach activities to be undertaken in view of promoting alternatives to detention for children in contact with the law. With support from UNICEF, the Government also pro-actively engaged in a regional study on the social services workforce, positioned itself as a leader in this field by hosting the deriving regional conference, and put in place a costed action plan to upgrade and modernise its social services workforce and system.

In 2019, TCO made efforts to broaden its partnership and engagement with the private sector in line with the global guidance. Already since the past four years, UNICEF ensured that private sector was at the policy table with the government, given it is an important service provider in ECD, health and education, and all the modeling (design and implementation) in these areas is being done through public-private partnerships. In 2019, the partnership with the private sector moved yet another step forward when private sector company Esprit was selected for the management of one of the Second Chance education centres. In addition, there are ongoing discussions with the private sector to replicate the ECD reference centers in 2020, and the private sector was mobilized to support the CRC 30 years celebrations, with among others all 3 telecoms companies sending a flash message to all subscribers to alert to the CRC 30 anniversary.

Over the course of 2019, through its partnership with the NGO, ADO+, the country office enabled the participation of adolescents in the pre-session of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, providing Tunisia's adolescents with a tangible opportunity to make their voices heard and enabling the members to engage first hand with them rather than having to rely on second-hand pre-selected and possibly filtered information. The partnership with the NGO, Tunisian

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Human Rights league (Noble peace prize laureate) has enabled UNICEF to monitor and advocate for access to protection of children including of migrants in detentions.

The country office took advantage of the CRC@30 and the publication of the MICS6 to promote the realisation of the rights of every child. The MICS6 data are being widely disseminated and used, at regional and national levels, by policy and decisions makers, the media and in political debates. A call for increasing investment in Human Capital is reflected in political parties' agenda, the new government programme as well as some donors ODA/budget support operations. The commemoration of CRC@30 was intensified in the last quarter of 2019 with public advocacy efforts with the press, TV debates, a social media campaign reaching over 2 millions people, public advocacy at festivals, and the organisation of regional celebrations and a big event in Tunis with children and adolescents and high-level participation from policy and decision makers, including ministers, development partners, the private sector, civil society and parents and children. The anniversary further provided a hook for expanding dialogue with the private sector to pave the way for strengthening public and private partnership, especially in the areas of early childhood development and the second chance programme under the Gen-U initiative.

During the last quarter of 2019, the Tunisia UN Country Team launched the process of development of the CCA and UN Cooperation Framework. UNICEF also started with the drafting of the situation analysis of children as well as the external evaluation of the country programme with the support of the regional office.

Having moved into newly constructed offices, the Country Office has made several efforts to start greening the premises over the course of the year, most notably by replacing all incandescent light bulbs with LED lights and by using occupancy sensors to cover not only the light but also heating systems.

In February 2019, three days all staff retreat was organized jointly with the staff association. In 2019, five colleagues went on stretch/mission assignments to expand their experiences, to learn and exchange. The country office further received four staff from other country offices, providing important learning opportunities. 5 staff further participated in master classes and Public Finance for children respectively organized by the Regional Office and all staff completed the mandatory training courses. An USD 622 allowance was assigned to staff to use for further learning and wellbeing. The Country Office further managed to finalize the recruitment of 8 positions in 2019 and ensured a 50-50 gender balance in the office. The challenge remains in ensuring a balance within the international staff category between staff from industrial countries (71%) and staff from programme countries (21%), caused by the difficulty of recruiting francophone staff from programme countries.

The Annual Management Plan was finalized and shared end March 2019. The country office participated in the Common Country Analysis – CCA - initiated by the Resident Coordinator Office, including through volunteering as pen-holder on several issues of key relevance for UNICEF's mandate. The CCA will serve as an important basis for the development of the new country programme. The country office further updated the risk assessment matrix, the Country Management Team Management (CMT) conducted regular meetings to review, discuss and recommend actions on key programme, staff and operational issues, the operations section successfully provided support to the achievement and implementation of programmatic and operational results for 2019, with support also provided to Libya Country Office based in Tunisia Country Office on finance and administration issues mainly.

The country office further organized an internal office mid-year AMP review meeting on 23 September 2019 with the participation of all staff. Regular all-staff meetings were held every Monday and served as a platform for open and transparent feedback on office decisions, programme and operations updates.

These results for children could have not been achieved without the generous support from the governments of Italy, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, the European Union and the UNICEF French Committee. The country office has also continued to enjoy a solid partnership with the World Bank and saw its advocacy dialogue with the IMF, EIB and IFC strongly evolve. Furthermore, under the leadership of the country office, the United Nations in Tunisia completed its BOS with implementation due to start in 2020. To conclude, these results were achieved in new programme and organization office structures following 2018 MTR and thanks to a dedicated team committed to realise the rights of every child.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Over the past years, UNICEF invested a lot in modelling through a bottom up approach, ensuring consultations with - and inclusion of - all stakeholders. Taking into account the high mobilisation efforts required due to the wide heterogeneity of partners, and the frequent changes among key decision-makers and technical government staff, the significant time spent at the drawing board for the development of innovative approaches that would make a real tangible difference for children

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Tunisia de facto delayed project implementation and have resulted in that the country office has had to ask several donor contract extensions.

The approach is now clearly starting to bear its fruit. Government partners have taken full ownership for moving forward on action plans developed with UNICEF's support and are applauding UNICEF's convening role in forging cooperation between various ministries and the private sector as a best practice coordination example, thereby strengthening the establishment of UNICEF as a highly respected convenor. The World Bank, swayed by the high quality of the offer developed with UNICEF's support, has stepped in to ensure both the scaling up and sustainability of the new early childhood education models. The Ministry of Education decided to scale up several initiatives developed with UNICEF's technical support to the national level, ranging from the use of tools for the identification of learning disabilities and students at risk of dropping out to the training on hygiene practices in schools and the decision to use the regional educational plans as the basis for the next five-year national educational plan.

As an example, the partnership and dialogue with the World Bank has enabled the design and scaling up of programmes including capacity building and jointly strengthening the early childhood education (ECE), the education and the social protection systems. UNICEF's careful, albeit cumbersome and time-intensive, investment in strengthening the early childhood education system, in cooperation with all key stakeholders from the Government, civil society and the private sector, enabled a real break-through for the sector. The sustainability of UNICEF's work on the development of the curriculum for the pre-primary, the in-service training of teachers from both the public and private sectors, the development of a bachelor's degree for professionals in ECE and the modelling of standards for preschool classes – is now guaranteed for scaling up through the World Bank's new "*Programme de Renforcement des Fondations pour l'Apprentissage en Tunisie*" (PREFAT) to the Tunisian Government. These important break-throughs were made possible through UNICEF's commitment to deliver evidence-based inclusive policy dialogue and quality programming, pro-actively investing in sharing its research findings and methodologies and availing its technical expertise. Tunisia Country Office (TCO) therefore sees this experience as an important lesson learned to keep investing in its partnerships to further results for children.

The partnership with the World Bank was also furthered through UNICEF's advocacy which helped moving the policy dialogue with the Government forward. This ultimately resulted in the Government's and Parliament adopting and approving respectively of the World Bank's PREFAT programme. UNICEF's participation in the development of the design of this programme ensured the inclusion of UNICEF's work on ECE and Education and the used of the recommendation of the ECE fiscal space study supported by UNICEF.

UNICEF and the World Bank's further joined forces by making financial and technical expertise available for the design of a common approach for the establishment of a universal cash grant for children. Whilst the Government recognized the need for reforms in the subsidies, UNICEF's message that the potential negative impact of the phasing out of these subsidies on the most vulnerable households could be mitigated through the gradual introduction of a universal child allowance was not really heard. The World Bank was however very sensitive to this argument and their backing for this approach, together with UNICEF's fiscal space study which provided further evidence, enabled a full turn-around by decision makers including the Ministry in Charge of Reforms, and full acceptance of the positive impact a cash transfer for children could have for all households, especially the most vulnerable. It is important for UNICEF to recognize that it would not have been able to achieve this on its own. By the end of 2019, the Government submitted to Parliament a draft law for the creation of a social protection floor including a cash grant for children.

In terms of constraints, despite the establishment of the UN Portal by UNICEF in 2019, the anticipated increased cooperation on the programmatic side with civil society organisations did not concretise. NGOs especially national and local have find it difficult to use the portal when responding to calls for proposal due to the level of details and documentation required and language barrier on one hand . Another explanation is that local civil society organisations do not have a large capacity to implement large projects. TCO has decided to take advantage of the external evaluation of the country programme to ensure close attention to improving this in 2020.

Procurement has been identified as a challenge across the UN system in Tunisia. To help address this, a Business Operation's Strategy has been put in place in 2019. Within TCO, which significantly increased its size of operations and did not have a strong previous experience in procurement of services, a lot of tensions, mis-communication and mis-understanding appeared between teams, resulting in delays in implementation. It was recognised for the need to improve: clarity on roles and responsibilities; the monitoring and updating of the supply plan; staff to complete mandatory course on procurement and bring colleagues on stretch assignments. Better preparedness for peak procurement of services was further identified as well as anticipating external factors (i.e. reduced working hours during summer).

In terms of recruitment, TCO, along with other UNCT members encountered difficulties in the fulfilling national staff positions, contract duration being a factor influencing the decision. The use of UN Volunteers was identified as a successful avenue to be further pursued, but more work is required to help ensure the added value is clear for the volunteers and the

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existing teams.