

### Update on the context and situation of children

Turkmenistan's economic prospects remained positive, with the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate forecasted at 5.6 per cent in 2019. The IMF expects the economic growth to moderate over the medium term as hydrocarbon production stabilizes, recommending, as one of the adjustment measures, higher, and better targeted, spending on health and education to foster human development and improve inclusiveness. The budget/GDP ratio remained relatively low, expected at 13 per cent in 2019, which is then reflected in lower health expenditure as a percentage of GDP compared to other higher middle-income countries. Salaries, benefits and pensions were increased by 10 per cent, as each year; however, analysis of neither the interplay of this with the rise in the consumer price index nor of the adequacy is available. Keeping relatively low prices for basic commodities and services (bread, electricity, gasoline and water, public transport), primarily through subsidies, remains a priority.

The enabling policy environment for child rights further improved. The Presidential Programme for Socio-economic Development for 2019-2025 was adopted, one of its objectives being the improvement of living standards, people-centred social policy and growth of human capital aimed at a fair distribution of prosperity. At the end of the year, Turkmenistan adopted its next Early Childhood Development (ECD) Strategy for 2020-2025. The strategy, which had been in the making over the last four years, represents a cross-sectoral commitment and undertaking of the country, requiring concerted and coordinated efforts by various partners, and highlights main areas of interventions to achieve selected SDG targets, in particular, target 4.2.

The Government conducted further discussions, with UN support, on SDG targets and indicators, with a revised framework adopted at the end of the year. Turkmenistan presented its report of the first Voluntary National Review (VNR) to the High-level Political Forum. The VNR process was useful for understanding the current situation and identifying next steps. Those include continuation of the work on improvement of the national statistical capacity for SDG monitoring, mechanisms for financing for development and promotion of global and regional cooperation through the development of a regional framework for cooperation, such as the elaboration of a Special UN Programme for the Aral Sea Basin.

The VNR report also presented data on selected SDG indicators as a statistical annex. Beyond this and with the findings of the 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and the UNFPA-supported domestic violence survey only expected in 2020, no considerable change was observed in 2019 in terms of data availability and disaggregation.

Turkmenistan introduced three more vaccines funded from the state budget and is discussing the further improvement of its flour fortification programme. While immunization rates remained high, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the fortification programme, with the anaemia data remaining obsolete. The Inter-agency Group for Mortality Estimates assessed under-five mortality at 46 per 1,000 live births in 2018, with the neonatal period accounting for most of the childhood mortality. The lack of demographic and disaggregated mortality data prevents further analysis. However, the Assessment of the Effects of the Aral Sea Crisis on Maternal and Child Health, conducted in 2019, pointed to the particular vulnerability of the Dashoguz velayat in terms of child mortality and morbidity. The National Strategy on Climate Change was revised, to better align with the Paris Agreement and the Government has initiated the development of a global programme to adopt a multi-party and multi-pronged approach to addressing the impact of the Aral Sea crisis.

Turkmenistan has universal birth grants and cash benefits for children under three. With data on poverty and economic vulnerabilities not publicly available, it is expected that within the framework of the joint programme on improvement of community-based social services, which will start in 2020, more information on vulnerabilities and needs may become available, helping produce evidence-based solutions and further strengthen the social protection system.

The number of children with disabilities, both receiving disability benefits and in residential care, increased. About a fifth of 21,059 children with disabilities who received benefits were in residential care institutions, although further assessment of the duration of their stay is needed. Despite the increasing focus of national authorities on children with disabilities, they still face major challenges in gaining access to inclusive education, including a need for more trained teachers and child care and development professionals, improved physical access, and more supportive social and cultural norms.

To understand and analyze the situation better and in preparation for the next country programme, UNICEF is working with the Government to review and finalize the findings of the 2019 MICS, get disaggregated trend data on children in residential care institutions, causes of disability, access to justice and health sector budget expenditures.

Having a 12-year compulsory education system, Turkmenistan has universal attendance of girls and boys (when also considering home education for children with disabilities) at the primary and lower secondary education. At the upper secondary education, some regions see decreased attendance. On the other hand, pre-primary education and higher education enrolments remain relatively low. Particularly, the latter has a much lower Gender Parity Index (0.6) than other

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levels of the education system. While the numbers of students in professional and higher education have increased by a quarter over the last 10 years, a considerable number of young people also study abroad. The Analysis of the Situation of Youth, conducted with joint UN efforts in 2019, recommended building nationwide expertise that would work on issues related to gender, disability, adolescent and youth health; improving statistical information; expanding research on youth themes; enhancing youth policy and methods of reaching out to youth and fostering the public-private partnerships for youth.

The second report of the Ombudsman was published. It recommended strengthening the work among parents on child rights awareness and reinvigorating the Commissions on Juvenile Affairs, existing in each sub-national level, whose immediate duties include taking measures to prevent homelessness, violations of law by and ensure the rights of minors.

The Government and UN signed an MoU on emergency preparedness and its first action plan while the work on drafting the humanitarian law continued.

### Major contributions and drivers of results

The development of the next programme of UNICEF and cooperation framework (UNSDCF) of the UN with Turkmenistan started. UNICEF actively participated in all the processes leading to the drafting of the UNSDCF, including the evaluation of the previous partnership framework, Common Country Assessment (CCA) and deliberations on defining the priorities. Similarly, capitalizing on the 2018 mid-term country programme review, Situation Analysis of Children and Women, Gender Programme Review, detailed causality analyses, other critical programmatic reviews and analytical work as well as consultations with partners, the priorities of the next country programme were elaborated along with four programme strategy notes. These priorities are aligned with and support the objectives of the National Plan of Action on Realization of Child Rights (NPARCR) for 2018-2022.

UNICEF contributed to the development of the first VNR report through technical advice, analysis of data and design of the report. The baseline assessment for selected SDG indicators, developed by UNICEF in 2018, served as a reference for the VNR and other SDG-related processes. In addition, UNICEF developed insights on data availability and disaggregation focusing on the 2019 VNR theme.

Significant efforts were made to finalize the 2019 MICS data collection, data entry, analysis, and survey findings report. The fieldwork was completed in August with the quality-assurance measures in place to ensure smooth data collection process. However, it was not possible to have the survey findings report in place by the end of the year, which is now anticipated in the first half of 2020. The survey is funded by the Government, UNICEF and partially by UNFPA. The 2019 MICS results are very much anticipated, given the existing challenges with data availability and disaggregation, including for SDG indicators, as well as its new modules on learning, functioning and young women not in education, employment or training (NEET), the last measured in MICS for the first time.

The 30th anniversary of the CRC created ample opportunities to expand existing and establish new partnerships with major stakeholders and seek the renewed commitment of the country to child rights. UNICEF strengthened public and private sector partnerships through evidence-based policy advocacy and resource mobilization. The partnership with the Turkmenistan Football Federation ensured that kids from different backgrounds escort players during a FIFA World Cup qualifying match between Turkmenistan and Sri Lanka, attended by 26,000 fans. CRC messages were announced during the game and a special banner congratulating all children on the World Children's Day was placed at the stadium giving the highest visibility to UNICEF branding and messaging. The Chinese and Afghan Embassies, as well as the European Union Delegation Office, supported UNICEF by making statements on their experiences with child rights and the CRC during the high-level CRC event. Turkmenistan joined the global pledge on CRC and issued a renewed commitment to the realization of child rights.

In line with the revised Costed Evaluation Plan, the evaluation of Turkmenistan's ECD Policy and UNICEF's contribution to its planning, implementation and monitoring started, which, with the adoption of a new ECD strategy at the end of 2019, turned out to be very strategic.

Additional critical results for children in each of the Strategic Plan goal areas are highlighted below:

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

The reduction of childhood mortality and improvement of the quality of maternal, newborn, and child care (MNCH) remained a priority for the Ministry of Health and Medical Industry (MoHMI). The Ministry approved the package of standards on new-born, child and maternal health care. The package, formalized through a ministerial decree, had been developed in partnership with the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and with UNICEF's technical support in 2018. It is

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based on WHO recommendations and includes nine standards, constituting a framework for improving the quality of care in health facilities. A team of 38 national trainers learned how to start implementation and apply the new standards and tools to provide on-site monitoring and mentoring, including on the supportive supervision and monitoring components.

The introduction of such a package was one of the recommendations of the perinatal audit, introduced in Turkmenistan with joint UNFPA-UNICEF efforts in 2017. This year the MoHMI team completed the audit in two velayats, findings of which were further used for decision making to close gaps in delivering life-saving interventions.

The MoHMI introduced vaccines against Pneumococcus, Rotaviruses and Hepatitis A, following years of discussions and advocacy. The national immunization calendar was updated accordingly and additional state funding amounting to USD 17 million was allocated.

The work in the area of infection control continued with UNICEF support. All maternities, hospitals and PHC facilities country-wide integrated the new Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) into their practice, were provided with supportive supervision and refreshed their knowledge on Infection Prevention and Control (ICATT). ICATT is now used by about 1,000 health workers. SOPs are also being introduced into undergraduate and postgraduate professional medical education.

The country also made considerable progress in terms of infant and young child feeding. The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative covering three velayats so far was extended to the remaining two velayats, with eight primary health care facilities (PHC) gaining a baby-friendly status. All workers of the selected PHC facilities in the ECD demonstration areas (30 per cent of all facilities in the concerned districts/cities) were covered with child care and nutrition counselling.

UNICEF continued its support to the establishment of the early intervention system. Guidelines for Monitoring Child Development (GMCD), previously used in selected facilities in three velayats of the country, were adopted as a standard tool for nation-wide use and its digital application further improved. The capacity development programme, run in cooperation with the Ankara University of Turkey, continued, resulting in additional PHC facilities being able to provide early identification and intervention services. 7,000 children were assessed using the new tool in selected areas in 2019; 8 per cent needed early intervention services.

UNICEF, WHO, and UNFPA supported the development of a new RMNCAH Strategy for 2020-2030 and its five-year action plan, the country's main instrument for achieving SDG3 targets. The MoHMI involved other ministries into discussions of the draft documents to ensure a cross-sectoral approach for the implementation of the strategy, once adopted.

Following the 2015 CRC concluding observations, expressing concern about the damaging effects of the Aral Sea crisis on children living in nearby areas, UNICEF supported an assessment of the health situation of children living in the Dashoguz velayat. The assessment confirmed the particular vulnerability of children in Dashoguz and made recommendations both in terms of further research and immediate steps in terms of strengthening primary health care in the velayat.

UNICEF provided technical assistance to the MoHMI and State Statistics Committee (SSC) in the establishment of an electronic child mortality database. The statistical form template for the child mortality data collection was included in the regular data collection to allow sufficient disaggregation. The data are, however, are not for public use. The MoHMI also adopted a strategy for improvement of the quality of the health information system.

Partially with USAID funding, the MoHMI and UNICEF partnered with the Iodine Global Network (IGN) to further develop the FORTIMAS system - a nutrition surveillance system. The quality of collected data varied in terms of consistency and reliability, which indicated a need for further support to improve data collection and standardization of the procedures.

To follow up on the plans of the Regional Nutrition Capacity Development and Partnership Platform in Central Asia and the Caucasus, established in 2018 in Ashgabat, the MoHMI and MoE approved the establishment of a Nutrition Department at the Turkmen State Medical University (TSMU). The department will help strengthen the national capacity in management, planning, and implementation of nutrition interventions. UNICEF and WHO provided technical support in building the capacity of the National Public Health and Nutrition Center, which will serve as a resource centre for the department. The discussions on further improving the premix for flour fortification advanced, with the new composition to be tested in 2020.

The Office's engagement with the private sector was reinvigorated, with food industry companies participating in the launch of the State of the World Children's Report on nutrition.

The newly established partnership with the State Committee on Television, Radio and Cinematography (SCTRC) and the Women's Union helped reach many parents and caregivers on early childhood development and parenting skills through radio and TV programming.

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

UNICEF continued supporting Turkmenistan's efforts to measure and achieve SDG 4 targets. Technical assistance was focused on strengthening the quality and inclusive early learning with a focus on universal pre-primary preparation and inclusive education approaches.

The ambitious result to initiate the implementation of the long-term operational plan, developed with UNICEF's support in 2018, in one of the most disadvantaged velayats to bring up its low pre-primary school education (21 per cent vs. 44 nationally) has not fully taken off yet. While several rounds of discussions took place with the Ministries of Finance and Economy (MoFE) and Education (MoE), involving both national and sub-national authorities, the initiation did not start pending further in-depth analysis of the situation and inventory of facilities in the velayat by authorities. On the other hand, the deliberations have led to the decision by the Government to develop a full-fledged programme for the nation-wide improvement of the pre-school education system. The programme is expected to be adopted soon.

UNICEF continued support to the MoE with the integration of the package of play-based pre-primary curriculum, parental empowerment resource documents, and child-friendly measurement tools in the pre-school education system. All pre-school professionals now receive annual training on the use of the early readiness checklist, provided by the velayat methodological centres. These mechanisms and tools were acknowledged and further supported in the recently adopted National ECD Strategy for 2020-2025.

The work with the MoE for advancing multi-disciplinary services for children with disabilities and their families continued with the technical assistance of the St. Petersburg Early Interventions Institute. A study visit to Russia for the directors of teaching-educational centres and heads of education departments resulted in the preparation of concrete action plans per velayat for taking to scale the multi-disciplinary service provision. As a result, 9 multi-disciplinary teams under the auspices of teaching-educational centres and ECD Centres now provide individualized programmes for young children with disabilities and their families in line with the standard guidelines, although the current capacities do not allow to go to scale. The guidelines, developed by the MoE and informed by the principles of the social model of disability, set a standard algorithm for the multi-disciplinary team's activities, composition and functional responsibilities. It is now important to have at a minimum of 3 paid staff members in each team across the teaching-educational centres to ensure service provision in line with these new criteria.

UNICEF support to the MoE on inclusive education approaches led to initiating collaboration between 2 selected mainstream kindergartens and respective multi-disciplinary support teams to start individualized support for children with disabilities within their facilities. However, this is currently limited to the provision of play-based learning and application of some elements of early intervention techniques as part of the individual development plan under the guidance of the multi-disciplinary professionals. The postponement of the study visit of selected Turkmen education professionals to Moldova, aimed at learning from the Moldova experience and preparation of a road map on inclusive education, limited the pace of progress in terms of inclusive education.

Cooperating with UNESCO, UNICEF supported the MoE in the revision of the data collection forms across pre-school, pre-primary and secondary education for their better alignment with the requirements of potential data collection for SDG 4 indicators. Discussions are underway to further support this work as part of broader EMIS development and real-time monitoring.

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

The UNICEF ten-year roadmap and action plan for implementation of the Turkmen model of social services from 2018 constituted the basis for the development of a Joint UN Programme on the improvement of community-based social services. The two-year programme, one of the 30 around the world selected to get support from the Global SDG Fund in the amount of USD 2 million, brings together four UN agencies (UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and UNDODC) with UNICEF as the leading agency and has a very ambitious target of making a transformative change in the current system of social service delivery, to reach out to the most deprived and vulnerable populations and to address their specific needs. UNICEF will focus on the development of the social work practice in general, as well as on specialized services for girls and boys in vulnerable situations. The drafts of the social work curriculum provided by UNICEF in 2018 were used in the preparation of the social work curriculum at the State Pedagogical School (3-year College) and at the Medical University.

The initial discussions on the development of the next periodic CRC report (due by October 2020) and the possibility of an alternative report have started in 2019. The CRC reporting process will be used as an opportunity for in-depth stock-taking, mobilizing and consolidating the work of different entities and applying participatory approaches.

Support to the Ombudsman Office in establishing its structure and place in the child rights protection and promotion architecture continued, with direct technical assistance as well as support to outreach activities, including sub-national

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workshops with an emphasis on child rights realization and protection. The representatives of the SSC and Ombudsman Office participated in the regional network meeting dedicated to monitoring child protection indicators, including selected SDG indicators.

UNICEF supported the Government in consultations on mechanisms of implementation of the NPARCR. Some actions were further refined with revisited timelines and clarified accountabilities. The Roadmap was developed together with the Working Group of the Inter-ministerial Commission in March 2019 and helps outline specific responsibilities and timelines for its implementation.

While birth registration is almost universal (99.6% according to the 2015-16 MICS), Turkmenistan's State Programme on Eliminating Statelessness for 2019-2024, adopted at the beginning of the year, stipulates making sure that all children, including those born to stateless parents, are registered and seeks UNICEF's support in this regard.

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

UNICEF continued support to the MoE and National Red Crescent Society in strengthening resilience for climate change adaptation. The initiative was partially funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives. Following the pre-test of the climate change, environment and energy (CEE)-related formal curricula in 17 schools in the Akhal and Dashoguz velayats, the curriculum was approved by the Government for nation-wide implementation. A separate emphasis was placed on introducing child-centred, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive interactive teaching. A teacher training manual to guide interactive teaching and learning for five environment-related subjects across primary and secondary education was developed and introduced, to be further tested in early 2020.

For the introduction of a 'Green School' initiative, UNICEF helped develop a concept note, which is now being reviewed by the MoE specialists. Turkmenistan revised its climate change strategy in 2019. UNICEF helped introduce child-related elements, which were missing before.

UNICEF stepped up its technical support to the MoE in 2019 in terms of school safety assessment. As a result, 238 additional schools and 243 kindergartens were assessed. To further promote disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction, more than 100 professionals providing care for children with disabilities, were also involved in the training preceding the assessments. Within the framework of the 2019 MoU signed between the UN and Government on emergency preparedness and given a high demand, UNICEF organized information sessions for the specialists of civil defence and emergency operations of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in monitoring school safety. Representatives of the MoD and other partners were also part of the regional workshops on emergency preparedness.

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

UNICEF partnered with UNDP, UNFPA and the Ministry of Sports and Youth Policy (MoSYP) in a joint analysis of the situation of adolescents and youth in Turkmenistan, the findings and recommendations of which were made available in 2019. At the end of the year, the UN Resident Coordinator organized a meeting, where major stakeholders from the Government and civil society committed to a roadmap to act upon recommendations of the analysis. A joint UN group will work closely together with the MoSYP in drafting a new national programme on youth for 2021-2025. Moreover, UNICEF partnered with the Parliament to raise awareness among newly elected parliamentarians on the importance of youth participation. Various possibilities of youth consultative mechanisms were reviewed.

Partnership with young people was also at the centre of the CRC@30 celebrations. Young SDG Ambassadors expressed their views on the future children and youth want at the high-level meeting on the CRC@30 and helped facilitate the World Largest Lesson.

The 2019 MICS included the UNICEF/Washington Group modules on functioning among children and adults, with the findings expected in 2020. The initial mapping on hearing loss among young children, conducted as part of UNICEF support to establish a sustainable neonatal screening mechanism, revealed a critical need for a functional system to timely detect and support children hearing loss. An expert has already been identified to provide support to the MoHMI.

The progress with the health sector budget analysis was slow, primarily because of a lack of available data on health expenditures. There was a very good dialogue between the MoHMI and the UN towards the end of the year in regard to the budget reform process and how the effectiveness and efficiency of health budget allocations could be improved. This will be followed up in 2020, potentially with a costing exercise related to the development of the new RMNCAH strategy.

The capacity development of frontline health workers, with a focus on gender equality, continued. With the new data collection system (using GMCD as a basis) tested and ready for scale-up, it is expected to have solid gender-disaggregated data on child growth and development. UNICEF followed up on the action plans of the 2018 GPR and developed an office

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plan to ensure gender-mainstreaming, gender-friendly practices and facilities.

### Lessons Learned and Innovations

#### ***Long-term transformational planning***

As mentioned in the 2018 report when summarizing the SMR discussions, UNICEF started to engage in longer-term planning and scenario building exercises that might not necessarily cover the period of one country programme but were of strategic nature and made sure that our ongoing work with partners were not short-sighted and could be more clearly linked to the country's development vision and the 2030 agenda. Examples have included the development of an operational plan for the introduction of universal pre-primary education and a ten-year action plan for the development of social service and social services workforce. Both represented important priorities of the country programme, with slow progress so far.

This long-term transformational thinking has already proved to be useful. First, it generated a clearer, more strategic and down-to-earth evidence-based advocacy agenda for UNICEF to follow. Moreover, it helped partners to better understand the pathways and investments needed for the change to happen.

Both partners and UNICEF were thus ready when the opportunity presented itself. The action plan for the development of social services and all the background work it entailed constituted the basis for the development of a joint UN programme, not only ensuring the very much needed financial support from the Global SDG Fund but also mobilizing the RC Office, the whole UN and the Government around introduction of community-based social services in Turkmenistan. As a result, the very ambitious programme will start its implementation in 2020, giving hopes that the objectives of the CPD can still be reached, even if with some delays.

While the implementation of the operational plan for the introduction of one-year universal pre-primary education did not immediately kick off in 2019, the President emphasized the importance of the pre-school education system in public statements, followed by a request to the MoE to develop and submit a programme for this purpose. Although the draft programme is not available publicly, having the operational plan ready ensured that the MoE had enough inputs, scenarios and calculations to develop the draft programme on universal pre-primary education.

#### ***Strategic evaluations***

The Evaluation of Turkmenistan's ECD Policy and UNICEF's contribution to its planning, monitoring and implementation that started in 2019 is going to be the second evaluation during the current programme cycle when UNICEF will be pitching it at a strategic policy level, going beyond UNICEF interventions and looking at the systemic changes in the country. On the one hand, this creates additional challenges particularly considering data limitations and difficulties to evaluate certain criteria, such as efficiency. On the other hand, however, it is critical that UNICEF support is reviewed within the broader national eco-system, which is particularly important in light of the 2030 Agenda. With evaluation culture very weak, it is important to use every opportunity to strengthen the national systems. Therefore, it has been proposed to establish a reference group for the evaluation, with the co-chairing function divided between the Government and UNICEF and national partners consulted and involved in every stage.

The evaluation will thus have learning and accountability dimensions, including (i) Learning and improved decision-making (including through identification of lessons learned and good practices) to support ECD policy, with UNICEF and another actors' support; (ii) capacity development of government and other stakeholders in ECD; (iii) Accountability for UNICEF interventions in terms of contribution to ECD policy and its implementation. This double-fold purpose indicates an evaluation with both formative and summative dimensions. The evaluation is very timely as in December 2019 Turkmenistan approved its next ECD Strategy for 2020-2025 and is now planning to develop its action plan and M&E framework.

#### ***Identifying the right channels for reaching parents***

Supporting the national partners in the identification of the right platform and channel for reaching parents and caregivers of young parents has been one of the persistent challenges of the current country programme. With the potential for direct community-engagement being limited, service delivery platforms overstretched and the demand for resources in Turkmen increasing, the office pursued more systematically two channels of communication – radio and digital platforms – in line with its C4D strategy.

Radio programmes on ECD have been put in place within the framework of the established partnership with the State Committee on Radio, Television and Cinematography. It is also planned to cooperate with the Women's Union and mother

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groups to be established by them to get feedback on the aired radio programmes and in general understand better their channels of information for further advocacy in the areas related to the next CPD, including nutrition and adolescent health.

The other initiative, the Internet of Good Things (IoGT) has not moved ahead yet although UNICEF organized several rounds of consultations with the concerned stakeholders, developed a concept note and followed up formally. Such an initiative requires a cross-sectoral buy-in and participation, so it will require more concerted efforts and follow up in 2020. Once adopted the IoGT would allow scale, effectiveness and efficiency of ECD-related outreach considering that internet is enjoying a growing penetration in Turkmenistan, particularly through mobile phones.