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Theory of change, UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029

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I. Introduction

1. This document complements the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026-2029 and its Results Framework, by outlining the theory of change (ToC) that underpins them. The ToC is the high-level representation of how the Strategic Plan envisions change. It provides an explanatory framework for the Organization's contribution to realizing children's rights, in partnership with others, while allowing flexibility for regional and country-specific plans. It does not encompass everything that UNICEF will aim to do throughout the next quadrennium, nor does it include all programmatic details that will guide UNICEF's approach in the next four years.[1]

2. The ToC is guided by the principles outlined in the Strategic Plan. Grounded in its mandate to advocate for the protection and realization of children's rights, as set out in the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC), UNICEF supports Governments in fulfilling their obligations as duty bearers. In line with the principle of non-discrimination and the imperative to leave no one behind, the organization's work prioritizes the most marginalized children, including girls and children with disabilities. In all contexts, including emergencies, UNICEF upholds humanitarian principles and works to ensure ethical, effective, and locally driven responses that do no harm.

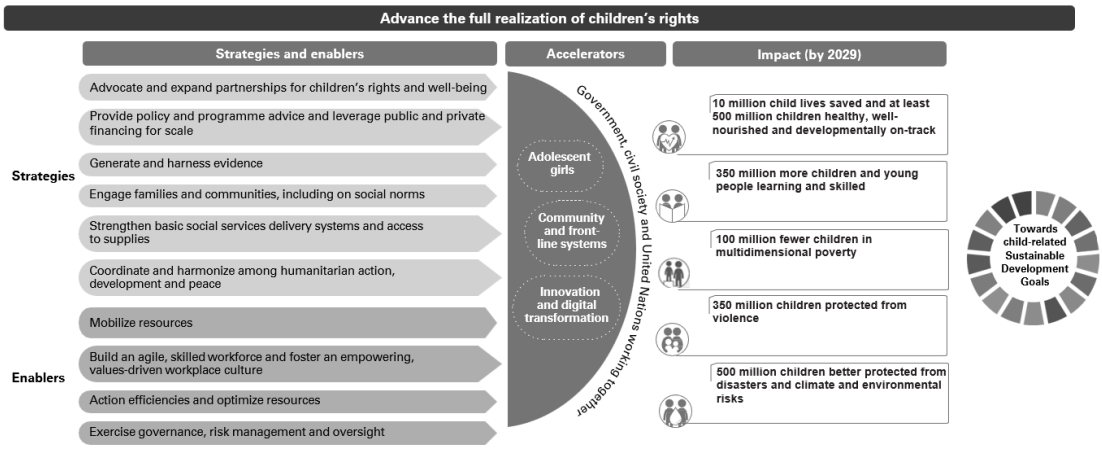
3. The ToC is aligned with the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of operational activities for the development of the United Nations system (QCPR), ensuring that UNICEF's work contributes to system-wide goals and accountabilities, strengthens coordination with other agencies, and reinforces shared efforts to leave no one behind.

4. The Strategic Plan outlines five impact results and twenty sub-level results that reflect pathways towards the achievement of each impact result. The sub-level results are linked to evidence-based, scalable solutions – grounded in UNICEF's areas of comparative advantage – to drive the necessary systemic changes at the country level for the impact results to be achieved.

5. The impact and sub-level results are owned by governments, with UNICEF holding itself accountable for providing catalytic support for their achievement. Through the application of its strategies, enablers and accelerators, UNICEF will engage with partners to support national and sub-national governments in implementing programmatic solutions, leveraging its policy, evidence and technical leadership towards results for children at scale.

[1] Please refer to the appendix for a list of updated strategies that present more details on the programmatic approach that will be implemented by UNICEF until 2030.

Figure I
UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029: Structure



II. Global context

A. Progress towards the child-related Sustainable Development Goals

6. In the final push towards 2030, the Organization can gather inspiration not only from the progress made over the past decades – including reductions in child, maternal and newborn mortality, stillbirths, stunting and poverty – but also from more recent achievements in accelerating progress towards the child-related SDGs.

7. Many countries have made considerable strides in areas such as expanding skilled birth attendance, reducing maternal and under-five mortality, and reducing open defecation, as a result of large-scale, evidence-based health interventions, community engagement strategies, and measures to address financial barriers to health care and nutrition. Significant progress has also been made in increasing vaccination coverage, exclusive breastfeeding rates, and birth registration; expanding access to basic sanitation and drinking water; and reducing adolescent birth rates. This progress has contributed to the reduction of child deprivations – such as stunting, exposure to violence, and limited access to education and social protection – which are often tied to poverty, inequality, and lack of access to quality services.

8. Despite this progress, the world is still far from achieving child-related SDGs. Based on country-level performance to date, by 2030 only one in four children will live in countries where 70 percent of the child-related targets have been met.

9. As of 2024, approximately 8.5 per cent of the global population – nearly 700 million people – lived in extreme poverty, surviving on less than $2.15 per day.[2] An estimated 651 million people in International Development Association (IDA) countries faced food insecurity in 2023, nearly double the 2019 figure.[3] As of 2023, about 1.4 billion children worldwide had no social protection coverage, despite a near doubling of coverage since 2015 (from 4.5 to 8.7 per cent).[4]

10. While maternal mortality fell by 40 per cent since 2000, an estimated 260,000 women died from causes related to pregnancy or childbirth in 2023, equivalent to one

[2] World Bank, 'Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024: Pathways Out of the Polycrisis', Washington, 2024.
[3] World Bank et al., *The Great Reversal: Prospects, Risks, and Policies in International Development Association (IDA) Countries: 2024 Update, 2024*.
[4] UNSD, 'Sustainable Development Goals Indicators': Report 2024, 2024.

woman every two minutes. Improved quality of care could save the lives of up to 150,000 mothers and 1 million newborns annually. An estimated 86 per cent of births were attended by skilled personnel in 2024, up from 61 per cent in 2000; however, progress is stalling – 18 million births occurred without skilled assistance in 2024. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 68 per cent of births were attended by skilled personnel, the lowest rate worldwide.[5]

11. The under-five mortality rate was 37 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2023, a 51 per cent reduction since 2000 and a 14 per cent reduction from 2015. The global neonatal mortality rate fell to 17 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2023, a 44 per cent reduction since 2000 and a 12 per cent reduction since 2015. However, the annual rate of reduction in under-five mortality has slowed, and 4.8 million children still die before reaching their fifth birthday. If current trends continue, an estimated 35 million more will die by 2030, over half of them neonates.

12. Despite recent progress, malnutrition among children under 5 years old remains a significant concern, posing heightened risks to their growth and development. In 2022, an estimated 148 million children globally were affected by stunting, and based on current trends, there will be no meaningful reduction by 2030.

13. An estimated 1 billion adolescent girls and women suffer from undernutrition – in the form of underweight and micronutrient deficiencies like anaemia – which affects their health and well-being and that of their newborns. Low birthweight, the earliest manifestation of malnutrition in children, affects 14.7 per cent of newborns, or 19.8 million, each year.[6] An increase in overweight and obesity in children has also been observed, with 138 million children aged 6-10 years affected by overweight in almost all low- and middle-income countries.

14. It is estimated that 2.2 billion people lack safely managed drinking water, 3.4 billion lack safely managed sanitation, and 2 billion lack basic hygiene services, leading to an unacceptably high disease burden on children and a disproportionate burden of water carriage on women and girls.[7]

15. The learning crisis is worsening at an alarming rate. Global learning poverty – the proportion of 10-year-olds who cannot read and understand a simple story – was estimated at 49 per cent in 2024, exacerbated by deteriorations in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.[8]

16. Over half of all children out of primary and secondary school are in Africa,[9] and in sub-Saharan Africa, only two in three children complete primary school on time, while girls remain far less likely than boys to attend school at any level. Globally, girls' completion rates exceed those of boys by 2 to 3 percentage points in both primary and secondary education; however, the rate of adolescent girls and young women aged 15–24 not in education, employment, or training (NEET) has been more than double that of adolescent boys and young men since 2005.

17. Most of the child protection-related SDGs are off track. While rates of child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) have fallen, progress has not been sufficient to eliminate these harmful practices. Violence against children is widespread, with 2 in 3 frequently subjected to violent punishment at home. Children with disabilities are more than twice as likely to experience violence than their peers

[5] UNSD, 'Sustainable Development Goals Indicators': Report 2024, 2024.
[6] UNICEF, 'Advancing Gender Equality for Optimal Nutrition in Adolescent Girls and Women': Technical-Note_Nutrition_Gender_Equality-2024.pdf.pdf, 2024.
[7] UNICEF and WHO, 'Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene', Annual report 2023, 2023.
[8] State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update
[9] UNESCO, 'Global Education Monitoring Report', 2024.

without disabilities.[10] In 2024, 1 in 6 adolescent girls aged 15–19 years experienced physical or sexual violence committed by their partners, and nearly 1 in 4 children lived with mothers who were victims of intimate partner violence.

18. Nearly 138 million children were engaged in child labour in 2024, including around 54 million in hazardous work that jeopardizes their health, safety, or development. Although the number of children engaged in child labour has fallen by over 20 million since 2020, the world has missed its target of eliminating it by 2025.

B. Multiple, overlapping crises

19. The challenges children face today threaten to roll back the progress made since the adoption of the CRC nearly 35 years ago. Escalating conflicts marked by increasing destruction of civilian infrastructure and disregard for human rights, alongside climate-related disasters, have driven humanitarian crises on a vast scale.

20. Over 473 million children – more than one in six – were estimated to live in conflict-affected areas as of 2023. The number of forcibly displaced people nearly doubled in the last decade, to more than 122 million, 40 per cent of whom are children. Nearly half of the world's children live in countries facing high risks of climate and environmental hazards.[11]

21. Democratic backsliding and political violence are increasingly prevalent threats, even within established democracies. The spread of misinformation and disinformation, often amplified by social media, distorts public perception and fuels polarization. Over 6 billion people now reside in countries where the rule of law has deteriorated since 2016, undermining the realization of children's rights, economic development and social progress.[12] Girls are especially affected by the erosion of children's and women's rights, facing widespread discrimination and heightened barriers to the realization of their rights.

22. While advancements in digital transformation, including artificial intelligence (AI), offer immense potential to enhance human capabilities and provide critical services, even in remote areas, they exacerbate disparities between wealthy and impoverished regions. The digital divide, characterized by digital illiteracy and a lack of digital infrastructure in poorer communities, threatens to leave behind vulnerable populations, particularly children, adolescents and young people.

C. Global demographic shifts

23. Global demographic trends present both challenges and opportunities for children. While projections indicate that the global child population will remain relatively stable, at around 2.4 billion by 2050, significant shifts are expected in where children live – with important implications for policies, investments, and service delivery. In 2050, most of the world's children will live in Eastern and Southern Africa, West and Central Africa, and South Asia.

24. The child population is getting smaller in all regions except sub-Saharan Africa, where it is expected to keep growing until 2075. Sub-Saharan Africa's population growth is unprecedented in its scale and speed, set to surpass historic demographic peaks seen in India and China in the late 20th century.

[10] Fang, Zuyi et al., "Global Estimates of Violence against Children with Disabilities", *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, vol. 6, no. 5, May 2022.
[11] UNICEF: Humanitarian-Action-for-Children-2025-Overview.pdf
[12] World Justice Project Rule of Law Index

25. Migration within and across borders is expected to grow, due to climate risks and increasing conflicts and crises. The percentage of children living in cities is projected to reach 1.3 billion in the 2050s.

D. Global debt crisis

26. The growing debt crisis represents a significant barrier to the economic and social development of low- and middle-income countries, constraining their ability to invest in social services for children and families. Between 2015 and 2022, interest payments on public debt, as a proportion of government revenue, increased by 50 per cent, and by 2027, they are expected to be 80 per cent higher, or almost double the 2015 figure. Low-income countries are disproportionately affected, with one in eight spending more on debt service than on education, health and social protection combined, exacerbating child poverty.

27. Limited fiscal space, insufficient tax revenue and constant trade-offs between debt repayment, infrastructure investment and social spending pose significant barriers to child-focused public finance, which is further weakened by issues such as misalignment, inefficiencies and absorption bottlenecks at subnational and national levels. The funds allocated for children are often insufficient, inequitably distributed and arrive too late in the life cycle – with serious implications for the realization of children's rights.

28. Minimal allocation to health services reduces investment in hospitals, clinics, vaccination programmes, and nutritional support, putting children's health and well-being at risk and exacerbating child mortality and morbidity rates. Reduced spending on education limits access to quality learning opportunities, particularly for children in low-income and rural areas, where resources are already scarce. As a result, millions of children are denied their right to education, undermining their future potential. Underfunded social protection systems leave millions of children without the support they need during crises or periods of economic hardship. The inability to adequately invest in children perpetuates poverty and inequality, trapping future generations in a cycle of deprivation.

E. Financial aid environment

29. The current financial aid environment is marked by tightening budgets, shifting donor priorities, and increased demand for limited resources. Shifts in donors' funding strategies have resulted in reduced flexibility and predictability of aid. Geopolitical tensions have strained financial flows, impacting the most vulnerable economies. These changes have important implications for the international community's ability to sustain support for child-focused development.

30. Global Official Development Assistance (ODA) – one of the most stable sources of external financing for developing countries, especially during crises – declined in 2024, falling by 7.1 per cent compared to 2023, the first drop after five years of consecutive growth[13]. It is expected to keep declining in the upcoming years. Over the last decade, aid as a share of national income has only incrementally risen, from 0.31 per cent in 2010 to 0.33 per cent in 2024. Contributions to multilateral organizations declined by nearly 11 per cent in 2024. ODA continues to be a vital

[13] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): Official Development Assistance levels in 2024, OECD, April 2025.

source of support for fragile economies, especially during crises,[14] and further declines will have a direct impact on outcomes for children.

F. Lessons learned

31. The findings from the Midterm Review and Evaluation of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, alongside cumulative insights from previous programming cycles, have been instrumental in shaping the Strategic Plan, 2026–2029, informing strategic shifts that respond to evolving global and regional contexts. Lessons learned have highlighted the need for more intentional, equity-driven approaches and reinforced the importance of long-term, system-wide collaboration to strengthen policy frameworks, institutional capacities, and service delivery standards. This evidence base provides a strong foundation for a forward-looking Plan that is both ambitious and grounded in practical experience.

32. The Strategic Plan, 2026–2029 will prioritize high-impact results that aim to dismantle structural barriers to children's rights and address the root causes of inequity. Lessons from the 2022–2025 period emphasized the importance of focusing on marginalized communities and intersecting vulnerabilities. Multisectoral approaches – supported by robust institutional frameworks, financial alignment, and sustained government engagement – are essential to avoiding the inefficiencies of siloed interventions and achieving systemic change. UN system-wide collaboration and investment in harmonized data systems that enhance monitoring and enable outcome and impact measurement have also been identified as critical elements for delivering measurable, meaningful improvements in children's lives.

33. Drawing on lessons learned from operating in a constrained funding environment, and having reviewed various scenarios, UNICEF recognizes the critical importance of strategically leveraging both public and private resources for children. The organization has learned that enhancing support to governments in mobilizing domestic resources and protecting social spending for children is essential to address the root causes of child deprivations and build more resilient, sustainable partnerships. Deeper engagement with the private sector, which plays an increasingly vital role in developing innovative solutions for children, is equally critical, alongside expanded fundraising efforts and advocacy for diversified and multi-year financing.

III. Programmatic shifts

34. Informed by emerging global trends and key lessons from the Strategic Plan 2022–2025, the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029 outlines three strategic programming shifts to accelerate progress and deliver results for children at scale. Through a new emphasis on focus, scale and impact, and differentiation, UNICEF aims to strengthen its ability to achieve meaningful change for children in an increasingly complex and dynamic global environment.

A. Focus

35. To accelerate measurable progress for children, across all contexts and especially for the most marginalized populations, UNICEF will focus its efforts on a small set of global priorities that contribute to achieving national targets. These priorities are

[14] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): Official Development Assistance levels in 2024, OECD, April 2025.

grounded in UNICEF's areas of comparative advantage and in approaches that address equity and gender equality.

36. UNICEF will shift from a broad set of results to a whole-of-organization focus on five impact results, supported by six strategies, four enablers and three accelerators to drive their achievement. The programmatic focus will be on the most relevant results for each context, in each country, depending on factors including the primary deprivations affecting children, the availability of local capacities, government priorities, and the maturity of evidence and existing systems.

B. Scale and impact

37. To reach entire populations of children – including marginalized groups – within countries and across borders, UNICEF will work with partners to scale up interventions and its coverage in areas where robust, evidence-based solutions already exist, catalysing immediate, tangible results and contributing to long-term impact. Where evidence is still emerging, generating new evidence will be a priority to inform the design and implementation of scalable solutions that do not reinforce existing inequalities.

38. Achieving scale and impact to uphold children's rights demands rethinking and strengthening the systems – networks of institutions, policies, and processes – that support programming in areas such as health, nutrition, clean water hygiene and sanitation, education, and protection. Across all contexts, UNICEF will continue to drive results for children by ensuring that the national systems they depend on are equipped to deliver at scale, reach every child without discrimination, can adapt to future challenges and are resilient to shocks. For example, to strengthen national education systems, UNICEF will support governments in implementing inclusive sector reforms, enhance capacity building, and improve education data systems. Similarly, to ensure essential supplies and services reach those in need, the organization will scale up its supply and procurement efforts by strengthening national supply chain systems, with a focus on strategic market engagement, supply chain resilience, and localization.

39. UNICEF will engage with governments on policy reform, enhanced financing, and strengthened partnerships, positioning itself as a partner of choice and a trusted broker, to leverage its influence beyond its implementation capacity. Partnerships with both the public and private sectors will remain instrumental to achieving results at scale and maximizing impact for children and young people.

C. Differentiation

40. Context-specific strategies rooted in focus, scalability, and impact can drive progress toward reaching every child. UNICEF will differentiate its approaches across contexts to ensure that interventions are relevant and effective, enabling countries to optimize resources and achieve high-impact results. The organization will provide technical support, policy guidance, and capacity-building to ensure that the strategies selected in each context are sustainable and scalable.

41. Evidence and risk analysis will guide strategy selection and implementation, taking into account national and subnational factors that affect children's rights and local capacities – such as country income level, demographics, financing potential, humanitarian response capacity, climate and environmental risks, conflict, fragility, and inequities. The approach will avoid rigid classifications, recognizing, for example, that income level may not reflect government capacity, especially at subnational levels or during emergencies, or political will to effect change.

42. In emergencies, UNICEF's humanitarian response will be tailored to a country's shock response capacity. Fragility will remain a key consideration across all contexts, requiring efforts to strengthen resilience at institutional, community, and household levels. In low-income countries, the focus could be on delivering essential services while strengthening local systems and infrastructure. In middle-income countries, the emphasis could shift to policy advocacy, supporting governments in enhancing social services and protecting children's rights, and scaling innovative solutions to address challenges like urbanization, digitalization, and environmental risks, along with targeted support for hard-to-reach children. In countries transitioning to high-income status, programming could focus on reinforcing policies and reaching chronically excluded populations.

IV. UNICEF Strategic Plan Theory of Change

43. UNICEF recognizes that in order to reverse the current trajectory and achieve the child-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of fundamental requirements must be in place at the country level,[15] as a foundation for children's well-being and development, which in turn drives broader societal progress.

44. These fundamental requirements are based on the understanding that:

(a) *if* children's lives are saved and they are healthy, well-nourished and developmentally on track;

(b) *if* children and young people learn and acquire the skills they need for life;

(c) *if* children are free from multidimensional poverty;

(d) *if* children are protected from all forms of violence; and

(e) *if* children are better protected from disasters and climate and environmental risks;

(f) *then* the general situation of children is improved, strengthening the basis for countries to achieve child-related SDGs and realizing the rights of every child.

45. The fundamental requirements represent the minimum threshold for children to reach their full potential, and their interdependence is evident. For instance, child survival, health and nutrition are prerequisites for learning, while education provides pathways out of poverty.

46. If mothers have access to quality prenatal care within a health system that prioritizes primary healthcare, babies are more likely to survive birth, be vaccinated, and receive essential nutrients. Malnutrition, especially stunting and wasting, severely impairs cognitive development and learning capacity. Stunted children lose up to three years of schooling and face 22 per cent lower earnings in adulthood.[16] Children's health and nutrition, in turn, relies on access to safe water and sanitation:

[15] Fundamental requirements are defined as changes that are critical to addressing the underlying causes of child rights deprivations in all settings, including humanitarian crises and fragile contexts. These changes are transformative and sustainable, going beyond the direct provision of services, supplies and outreach to children. They focus on change in the functioning of national and subnational systems and in the social, economic and political trends and norms that shape and support those systems. (Country Programme Planning: Guidance to Achieve SDG by 2030', UNICEF-October 2022).

[16] Victora et al.: 'Revisiting maternal and child undernutrition in low-income and middle-income countries: variable progress towards an unfinished agenda', Lancet 2021, 2021.

lack of WASH services contributes to repeated diarrheal disease and undernutrition, accounting for up to 25 percent of stunting cases.[17]

47. Children exposed to violence or exploitation are more likely to experience mental health challenges, which can undermine educational attainment and social participation. Unsafe environments – at home, in schools, or online – restrict learning opportunities, increase the risk of lasting physical and psychological consequences, and can perpetuate harmful norms that hinder equity.

48. Poverty itself is a cross-cutting barrier: children living in multidimensional poverty face compounded risks—poor health, limited access to quality education, inadequate protection, and higher exposure to environmental shocks—that reinforce deprivation across generations. The World Bank estimates that children living in multidimensional poverty are nearly twice as likely to drop out of school and face lifelong income disparities. Addressing poverty is critical for unlocking progress in all other domains.

49. Children who learn and acquire relevant skills can break cycles of poverty and contribute to stronger economies, creating positive feedback loops for health, protection, and resilience. For example, literate mothers are more likely to seek preventive care and vaccinate their children, improving survival rates.

50. Yet the health, nutrition, education, protection, and poverty-related fundamental requirements cannot be achieved without addressing the existential threats posed by climate hazards and environmental degradation, which strike children – who are not responsible for creating these crises – hardest of all. Climate- and environment-related shocks and hazards displace millions of children annually, destroy vital infrastructure, interrupt access to schooling and health services, increases nutrition and food insecurity erode household income, push families deeper into poverty[18] and expose children to greater risks of neglect, child marriage, and child labour. They reverse hard-won gains in survival, learning, and protection, and exacerbate existing inequities. The current situation underscores the urgency of embedding climate resilience into every child-focused strategy.

51. These dynamics illustrate that investments confined to one domain—health and nutrition, education, social protection, child protection, or resilience—cannot deliver the systemic change required to uphold children's rights and build resilient societies. Progress depends on integrated action across all five fundamental requirements.

52. The Strategic Plan's five impact results aim to help countries to address these fundamental requirements by establishing specific targets that guide UNICEF's programming and resource allocation. Because the SDGs can only be attained through an integrated approach, the five impact results are not stand-alone objectives – they are interdependent pillars within a dynamic system that recognizes that investments must occur simultaneously, and that progress in one area reinforces and accelerates progress in others. By transforming fragmented efforts into holistic programmes grounded in equity, gender equality, and inclusion, UNICEF seeks to empower the most vulnerable children and families, creating a multiplier effect that benefits entire communities and accelerates progress toward the SDGs.

[17] Humphrey, 2009; Prüss-Ustün et al.: 'Burden of disease from inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene in low- and middle-income settings: a retrospective analysis of data from 145. countries', Tropical Medicine and International Health, Volume 19, Issue 8, pages 894–905.

[18] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2022.

Impact Result 1: 10 million child lives saved and at least 500 million children healthy, well-nourished and developmentally on-track

53. A comprehensive, multisectoral approach to child survival and development, grounded in resilient, inclusive primary health care (PHC), is critical to saving children's lives and ensuring they are healthy, well-nourished and developmentally on-track. Integrated service delivery across the life course promotes children's rights to survival, health, nutrition, education and protection, and is essential to achieving universal health coverage.

54. If governments, partners and UNICEF focus on expanding access to lifesaving interventions for children and pregnant women; immunization; HIV treatment; mental health and psychosocial support; nutrition interventions to prevent and treat malnutrition among children, including adolescents, and women; early childhood development services and parenting support; and safely managed WASH, then **the lives of 10 million children can be saved and at least 500 million more children can be healthy, well-nourished and developmentally on-track**.

Figure II
UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029: Impact Result 1

55. UNICEF will support governments in strengthening PHC systems to advance maternal and child survival. This includes improving antenatal, perinatal, and postnatal care – particularly in high-burden and humanitarian settings – by expanding access to skilled birth attendance, emergency obstetric care, and adolescent pregnancy prevention. These efforts will prioritize adolescent girls, women with disabilities, and marginalized populations. UNICEF will advocate and expand partnerships for children's health and well-being, provide policy and programme advice, and leverage public and private financing to scale up access to life-saving interventions.

56. The Organization will collaborate with governments to develop and implement evidence-based policies and protocols that integrate health, nutrition, ECD, and WASH services, with a focus on marginalized and underserved populations, including children with disabilities and those affected by crises. These initiatives will enhance national systems' capacity to deliver equitable, gender-equal, and community-based care. UNICEF will generate and harness evidence, engage families and communities – including on shifting harmful social norms – and strengthen basic social service delivery systems to reduce child mortality and malnutrition.

57. Support for supply chain management, outbreak preparedness, and social and behaviour change (SBC) strategies will help to strengthen national immunization systems. These efforts will prioritize zero-dose children, including those in humanitarian settings and children with disabilities, and contribute to the eradication of wild polio. UNICEF will work to ensure that immunization remains high on the global health agenda and is integrated with broader areas of work such as efforts towards universal health coverage, improved nutrition and gender equality.

58. To support the elimination of paediatric HIV and improve survival outcomes, the organization will offer technical assistance to governments and foster partnerships to expand early diagnosis and antiretroviral therapy (ART) coverage for children, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. UNICEF will advocate for national mental health strategies and promote the integration of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into health, education, and protection systems. These services will be inclusive of children and adolescents with disabilities and tailored to the unique needs of adolescent girls. Greater coordination and coherence among humanitarian action, development, and peace will ensure continuity of care in fragile contexts.

59. A life-course approach will guide the scaleup of early childhood nutrition packages, school-based nutrition education, and maternal nutrition programmes. These interventions aim to prevent stunting, anaemia, and other forms of malnutrition in 1.2 billion children and women, with a focus on adolescent girls and women of reproductive age. UNICEF will generate and use evidence to inform programming, engage families and communities to promote positive nutrition practices, and strengthen inclusive national systems that integrate early stimulation, parenting support, and inclusive childcare – especially for children with disabilities.

60. UNICEF will strengthen WASH systems to improve access to safe water and sanitation. Support for governments in building resilient WASH systems through enhanced governance, financing, and risk-informed planning will help ensure that 100 million children – including those in humanitarian settings and children with disabilities – gain access to safe drinking water, and 200 million benefits from improved sanitation and hygiene. WASH programming will address the specific needs of girls, including menstrual hygiene management. Greater coordination across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts will help to ensure sustainable WASH access in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

61. UNICEF will partner with Ministries of Health and other stakeholders – including NGOs, UN agencies, universities, and research centres – to collect and analyse disaggregated data on morbidity and mortality rates, coverage and effectiveness of high-impact interventions, service gaps, access among marginalized groups, quality of care, and other key indicators related to maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health and nutrition. Evidence will be drawn from quantitative sources (e.g., MICS-7, DHS, censuses, facility surveys, vital statistics) and qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups), and will be generated through national systems, programmatic efforts, or implementation research using innovative technologies. These insights will inform country analyses, guide policy decisions, and strengthen programme implementation.

62. UNICEF will work closely with partners including WHO, WFP, the Global Financing Facility, Gavi, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, and the Bezos Family Foundation to bolster delivery systems by supporting innovation, scaling evidence-based interventions, and driving impact at the community level.

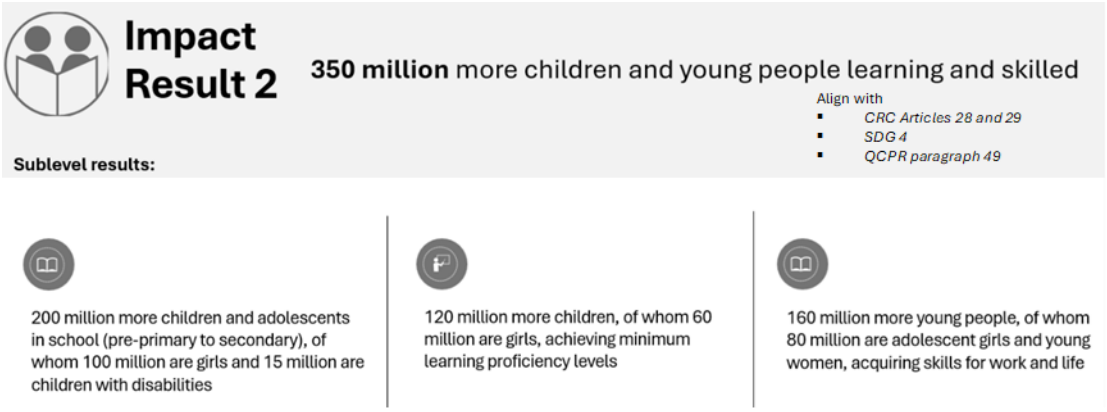
63. High-impact multistakeholder partnerships will be instrumental in advancing integrated, multisectoral service delivery across health, nutrition, and WASH. These include Every Woman Every Newborn Everywhere, the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, the Breastfeeding Collective, the Complementary Feeding Collective, the Global Action Plan partners to reduce child wasting, the Community Health Delivery Partnership, GPEI, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, and Sanitation and Water for All.

Impact Result 2: 350 million more children and young people learning and skilled

64. Quality education is a fundamental right of every child. Accelerating progress toward inclusive and quality education will require the focus to shift from access to ensuring that all children are supported to stay in school, feel safe, and learn, including in alternative learning environments. Special attention will need to be given to ensuring that every child achieves foundational literacy and numeracy by age 10 and increasing access to education for children with disabilities. As children progress through the education system, efforts to equip them with the skills they need for life, future employment and civic engagement will need to be prioritized, especially for adolescent girls and young women.

65. If governments, partners and UNICEF focus on supporting school enrolment and retention, from pre-primary to secondary; improving learning proficiency; and strengthening skills for life and work, then **350 million more children and young people can learn and develop skills.**

Figure III
UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029: Impact Result 2



66. In collaboration with governments, UNICEF will strengthen the generation and use of disaggregated education data – particularly on gender, disability, and crisis-affected populations – to inform inclusive education sector planning and policy reform. These efforts will be reinforced by community engagement to shift harmful social norms that hinder access to education, and by advocacy to uphold every child's right to quality learning, especially in humanitarian and fragile contexts.

67. By providing policy and programme advice and leveraging public and private financing, UNICEF will support governments in reforming education financing systems to prioritize equity, gender equality, and disability inclusion. These reforms will ensure that national education systems are better resourced, more resilient, and capable of delivering inclusive, quality education – particularly in underserved and conflict-affected areas.

68. To expand access to learning, UNICEF will support governments to implement flexible and inclusive education pathways – such as catch-up classes, second-chance education, and accelerated learning – targeting out-of-school children and adolescents, especially girls, children with disabilities, and those affected by emergencies. These interventions will be supported by strengthened basic social service delivery systems and improved access to essential learning supplies.

69. Support for curriculum reform and teacher development will aim to embed foundational skills (literacy, numeracy, critical, thinking and problem-solving) as well as digital and socio-emotional skills across formal and non-formal education systems. A particular focus will be placed on empowering adolescent girls and young women with relevant skills for work and life, while advancing gender equality and children's rights through expanded partnerships and cross-sectoral collaboration.

70. Advocacy for pro-poor policies and public spending will be a priority in all contexts, through policy dialogue and technical support aimed at addressing equity and the learning crisis. This includes enhancing connections with social protection systems to overcome household financial barriers and prioritizing an inclusive approach to system strengthening that addresses the structural challenges faced by adolescent girls, children with disabilities, migrant and displaced children, and other marginalized groups.

71. Schools will serve as platforms for integrated services, delivering health, nutrition, WASH, protection, and early childhood development (ECD) interventions. School-based health services will include immunization, screenings, mental health support, and hygiene education. WASH in schools will contribute to improving retention and menstrual hygiene management for girls. Social protection programmes, including cash transfers, will contribute to addressing economic insecurity for poor households and will also support school attendance, especially for girls, and facilitate access for vulnerable families to essential social services.

72. UNICEF will work with governments and partners to enhance the measurement of learning outcomes and foster national coalitions that advocate for quality education. These efforts will promote coherence across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actions, while ensuring inclusive, gender-equitable, and disability-inclusive learning environments that prioritize foundational learning for all children.

73. To address education disruptions during crises, UNICEF will support governments in strengthening the resilience of education systems through disaster risk reduction (DRR) approaches that address multiple hazards, risks, and shocks, including climate risks. Continuing to lead globally in education during emergencies, the Organization will collaborate with partners like Save the Children, UNESCO, and the World Bank to create effective, well-resourced responses tailored to each country. UNICEF will provide services and supplies directly only when local systems are unable to do so. Governments will receive support to enhance cash transfers to support families and improve children's access to education, and to address construction and supply-side needs as required.

74. UNICEF will collaborate with key partners such as the Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, and the World Bank to strengthen inclusive, resilient education systems, improve foundational learning, and support school enrolment, retention, and transition across all levels. These partnerships will contribute strategic financing, policy influence, and technical support to advance foundational literacy and numeracy, and ensure that marginalized children – including those with disabilities and those in crisis contexts – have equitable access to safe, quality learning environments.

75. The Organization will work strategically with national governments, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the World Bank, and other UN agencies to strengthen Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) and enhance data availability and use through tools like MICS-7, MICS-EAGLE, the Out-of-School Children Initiative, and Data Must Speak. These efforts aim to identify the root causes of educational disparities, improve understanding of learning outcomes—especially for marginalized children and those with disabilities—and build government capacity to design responsive policies and services. Collaboration with partners will also drive innovation in early learning and child-centred pedagogy, ensuring education systems better meet the needs of all children and adolescents.

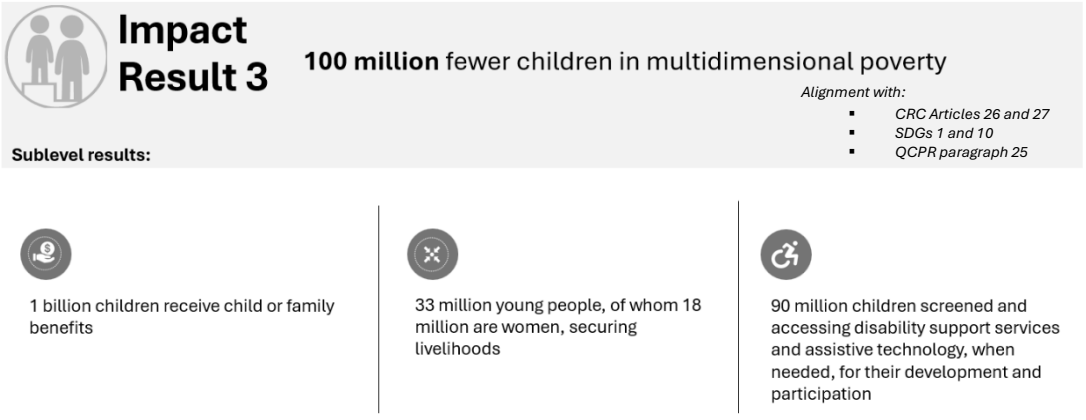
76. To support adolescents' transitions to decent work, UNICEF will partner with the World Bank, ILO, UNESCO, and UNFPA to ensure continuity of services during the transition from childhood to adulthood. Through Generation Unlimited, UNICEF and partners will support adolescents, particularly girls, to acquire the skills needed for work, life, and civic engagement.

Impact Result 3 - 100 million fewer children in multidimensional poverty

77. All children have the right to live free from poverty. When children grow up without adequate food, shelter, clean water and sanitation, healthcare, education and protection, their ability to survive, learn, and thrive is compromised, perpetuating poverty across generations and compromising national development. Early deprivations lead to lower educational attainment, poorer health and increased vulnerability in adulthood. Investing in reducing multidimensional child poverty yields high returns – improving individual outcomes, reducing inequality, and strengthening social and economic systems.

78. If governments, partners and UNICEF focus on expanding children's access to and quality of basic social services, equipping young people to secure livelihoods, and increasing access to disability support services and assistive technology for children, then **100 million more children can escape from multidimensional poverty.**

Figure IV
UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029: Impact Result 3



79. UNICEF will support governments to strengthen inclusive, shock-responsive social protection systems that prioritize child and family benefits, are designed to promote gender equality and disability inclusion, address the needs of displaced populations, and adapt to humanitarian contexts. These systems will be linked to essential services such as education, healthcare, and childcare, and reinforced through

policy and programme advice, the leveraging of public and private financing, and enhanced coordination across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts.

80. Through advocacy and expanded partnerships for children's rights and well-being, UNICEF will help governments and private sector actors build enabling ecosystems for youth employment, including vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and family-friendly policies. Special focus will be placed on adolescent girls and young women, with innovative, evidence-based approaches that promote gender equality, social inclusion, and long-term economic empowerment.

81. To advance social inclusion, UNICEF will embed disability-inclusive and gender equality approaches across all programming, promoting early identification of disabilities, provision of assistive technology, and accessible services. Family and community engagement will be used to shift social norms and reduce stigma, and the organization will work to strengthen basic social service delivery systems and support access to essential supplies for children with disabilities and those facing gender-based barriers.

82. Addressing the universal challenge of child poverty will require different pathways and interventions in different contexts, underpinned by a recognition that country income classification is not directly correlated with the quality of national spending on children.

83. UNICEF will work with key multilateral institutions to reinforce social protection systems, advance inclusive economic policies, expand child and family benefits, and support young people's access to livelihoods. Joint advocacy and knowledge exchange—particularly via the Coalition to End Child Poverty—will aim to mobilize sustained financing for long-term poverty reduction. In collaboration with partners such as the World Bank, ILO, UNDP, and Save the Children, UNICEF will use evidence, data, and integrated Management Information Systems to improve the design, delivery, and monitoring of child-sensitive social protection in both development and humanitarian contexts.

84. Public-private-youth partnership platforms such as Generation Unlimited and engagement with private sector partners – such as Accenture, Silatech, the IKEA Foundation, PwC, Capgemini, Microsoft, SAP, and the Al Ghurair Foundation – will contribute innovation, financing, and expertise to expand entrepreneurship and employment opportunities for young people.

85. Partnerships such as ATscale and the Global Indicator on Disability Care and Support (with ILO and OHCHR), will be instrumental to strengthening disability-inclusive social protection and increasing access to affordable, quality assistive technology for children with disabilities.

Impact Result 4 - 350 million children are protected from violence

86. Protecting children from violence is essential to upholding their rights, promoting their well-being, and enabling them to reach their full potential. Violence against children, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, exploitation and online violence, has immediate and long-term consequences for children's health, education, and development. Online violence – such as cyberbullying, sexual exploitation and abuse, grooming, and exposure to harmful content – can cause profound psychological harm, undermine self-esteem, disrupt learning, and in severe cases, lead to self-harm or suicide. It can also compromise children's privacy and safety, exposing them to exploitation that can persist across borders and over time.

87. All forms of violence perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality and weaken social cohesion and economic stability. By prioritizing child protection, including in digital environments, governments can foster safer, more inclusive societies and ensure that every child grows up free from fear, harm, and discrimination.

88. If governments, partners and UNICEF focus on increasing access to specialized social welfare and justice systems and services for children, parenting programmes and online protection; accelerating birth registration; and scaling up efforts to end child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and all forms of gender-based violence (GBV), **then 350 million more children can be protected from violence**.

Figure V
UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029: Impact Result 4

89. Governments will be supported to build resilient and inclusive child protection systems by strengthening legal frameworks, decentralizing coordination mechanisms, and expanding access to specialized social welfare and justice services – especially for children on the move, children with disabilities, and those in humanitarian settings. This will be achieved through coordinated policy and programme advice, strengthened basic service delivery systems, and advocacy to expand partnerships for children's rights and well-being.

90. Efforts to achieve universal, accessible, and crisis-resilient birth registration will be advanced by integrating civil registration with health, education, and social protection systems, while eliminating legal and gender-based barriers to legal identity. UNICEF will leverage public and private financing, promote gender equality and disability inclusion, and support innovative technologies to ensure continuity of services during emergencies.

91. MHPSS will be scaled up across child protection programming, using evidence-based and innovative approaches to promote healing, resilience, and emotional well-being for children and adolescents – particularly adolescent girls and those affected by conflict, displacement, or gender-based violence. This includes generating and harnessing evidence to inform standards and scale interventions in both development and humanitarian contexts.

92. Adolescents and communities will be empowered to challenge gender-based violence and harmful practices through inclusive school- and community-based prevention programmes, youth-led engagement – especially by adolescent girls and young people with disabilities – and social and behaviour change strategies. Families and communities will be engaged to shift harmful norms, while policies and laws will be strengthened to promote gender equality and end harmful practices.

93. Integrating child protection and education will create safe learning environments. Training educators, embedding safety measures, and establishing reporting systems on violence against children in schools will help address gender-based violence, child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and HIV. These efforts empower children and enhance resilience.

94. Work to enhance data systems and accountability mechanisms will ensure responsive, rights-based protection for all children by expanding child protection information management systems, supporting child-sensitive justice processes, and strengthening monitoring and reporting of grave violations. This will be supported by enhanced coordination across humanitarian, development, and peace efforts, and by innovation and partnerships to improve data use and service delivery.

95. UNICEF will collaborate with other UN agencies to ensure that governments have the evidence needed to address child protection issues, especially where gaps in data and evidence hinder effective policy and programming. Key initiatives include integrating disaggregated administrative data into national statistical systems, scaling up tools like Primero for case management, and implementing child protection surveys through MICS-7. The Organization will support data governance systems—promoting improved coordination, oversight, and secure management—to ensure that data on children are protected, recognizing their unique vulnerability and the critical role of data in shaping effective interventions.

96. To protect children from violence, UNICEF will collaborate with partners such as the European Union and other bilateral donors to expand access to justice, social welfare, and GBV services through increased financing and policy engagement. Close collaboration with UNHCR, IOM, and other key actors will aim to strengthen protection systems for children affected by displacement and migration, ensuring access to essential services and safeguarding mechanisms.

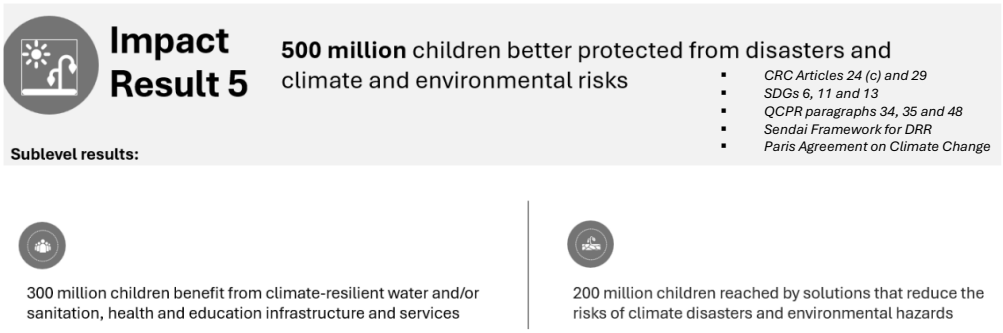
97. Key global alliances and regional bodies – including the Global Partnership to End Child Marriage, the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme to Eliminate Female Genital Mutilation, the End Violence Partnership, and the Spotlight Initiative – will mobilize collective advocacy, funding, and evidence to transform harmful social norms, end GBV, and build protective systems.

Impact Result 5 - 500 million children better protected from disasters and climate and environmental risks

98. Protection from climate hazards, disasters and environmental risks is a precondition for the realization of children's rights. Children face heightened risks during climate and environmental disasters, including death, injury, disease, malnutrition, disrupted access to water, and interruptions to education and health services, as well as displacement, family separation, and violence. Climate-induced migration and economic stress can increase rates of child labour and child marriage.

99. If governments, partners and UNICEF invest in climate-resilient social infrastructure and services, expanding access to systems that reduce the impacts of climate hazards and environmental risks and scaling up anticipatory action to reach children before crises escalate, then **500 million children can be better protected from disasters and climate and environmental risks**.

Figure VI
UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029: Impact Result 5



100. In partnership with governments, UNICEF will climate-proof essential services – WASH, health, and education – by deploying resilient infrastructure (e.g., solar-powered clinics, flood-resistant schools) and sustainable energy solutions. These efforts will prioritize adolescent girls, children with disabilities, and those in humanitarian settings, ensuring equitable access and continuity of services amid escalating climate and environmental threats.

101. To reduce the growing risks of climate hazards, disasters and environmental risks , UNICEF will work with governments to integrate child-sensitive DRR into national and local systems. This includes early warning systems and anticipatory action linked to child-critical services, designed with inclusive protocols and powered by innovative technologies to protect vulnerable children before, during, and after emergencies.

102. Implementation of a robust Environmental and Social Standards (ESS) framework will help to ensure all programmes are environmentally and socially responsible. This includes promoting gender equality, disability inclusion, and safeguarding children in fragile and high-risk environments, while enhancing accountability and sustainability across operations and partnerships.

103. By scaling up support for shock-responsive social protection systems, UNICEF will enable rapid cash assistance and integrated support during climate emergencies. These systems will be informed by child-centred data and risk assessments, and designed to reduce vulnerabilities – especially for adolescent girls, children with disabilities, and families in humanitarian contexts – while fostering resilience through innovative delivery models.

104. To ensure that national policies and other actions to address climate and environmental risks are responsive to the needs of children, UNICEF will generate and monitor data on these issues through a multi-layered, data-driven approach. The organization’s new global hazard database will enhance understanding of how environmental threats impact children’s health, education, and well-being, by strengthening Climate Landscape Analyses for Children (CLAC) at the national level and enabling further development of reports on children and climate hazards – including the Children’s Climate Risk Index (CCRI), which provides data by country based on children's exposure to climate-related hazards and their access to essential social services. Through partnerships with governments, research institutions, UNDP and other UN agencies, and research institutions, UNICEF will promote the use of child-sensitive indicators in national climate strategies.

105. UNICEF will work with government and multilateral partners – including the European Union, WHO, and UNDRR – to strengthen the resilience of essential

services and infrastructure. The Green Climate Fund will be an instrumental financing partner.

106. Global platforms like Sanitation and Water for All, the Climate Resilient Sanitation Coalition, and SIWI will advance advocacy and generate evidence for climate-smart WASH systems. Through mechanisms such as the Sanitation Financing Facility, these partnerships will mobilize resources and scale innovations that reduce children's vulnerability and enhance climate adaptation at the community and national levels.

V. Risks and mitigation measures

107. In an era of rapid and multidimensional change, UNICEF faces interconnected risks that threaten to overwhelm children and families, potentially reversing hard-won development gains. From climate natural hazards and economic vulnerabilities to political polarization and conflict, virtually every country is exposed to some combination of these challenges. To navigate this complex landscape, UNICEF will integrate risk awareness across all areas of its work, leveraging a well-established enterprise risk management framework.

108. By embedding proactive risk management into programming and operations, and investing in tools such as Enterprise Governance, Risk, and Compliance (eGRC), the organization will enhance its ability to anticipate and respond to risks. This risk-aware approach not only strengthens resilience but also enables UNICEF to align crisis response with long-term development, and sustain efforts in fragile contexts.

Table 1
Risks and mitigation measures associated with the overall theory of change

Risks	*Impact on the overall situation of children*	*Impact on UNICEF's programming and results*	*Mitigation measures*
Geopolitical Instability and Humanitarian Crises: Heightened geopolitical tensions, armed conflicts, natural disasters, and forced displacement increase the likelihood of severe disruptions to children's safety, rights, and development.	Children face increased exposure to violence and trauma, disruption of essential services like education and healthcare, and heightened risks of exploitation, trafficking, and recruitment into armed groups.	UNICEF programming may face restricted access, delays in delivery and targets, and a shift in resources from development to emergency response.	Strengthen emergency preparedness through pre-positioned supplies and surge staffing, invest in conflict-sensitive programming that fosters peacebuilding, and enhance partnerships with local actors to sustain services in hard-to-reach areas.
Fiscal Constraints and Development Financing Risks: Declining development aid and rising sovereign debt levels reduce fiscal space for child-focused investments.	Children will be disproportionately affected by reduced public investment in essential services such as education, healthcare, and social protection, which will lead to increased poverty and inequality – especially among the most vulnerable.	UNICEF programming will face challenges due to reduced funding for planned interventions, increased competition for limited donor resources, and the potential need to scale back programmes or reduce geographic coverage.	UNICEF will advocate for child-focused budgeting and safeguards for social spending in national fiscal policies. It will also diversify funding sources through private sector partnerships and innovative financing mechanisms, and will support governments in strengthening public financial management and improving the efficiency of social sector spending.
Digital Inequity and Technological Exclusion: Unequal access to digital infrastructure and tools exacerbates existing inequalities, limiting learning and participation opportunities for marginalized children.	Widening digital divides will leave many children without access to essential learning tools, deepening educational gaps. Marginalized children will face limited opportunities to participate in civic and social life, while inadequate digital literacy will increase their vulnerability to online risks.	UNICEF's digital learning and innovation efforts will risk excluding the most disadvantaged children. Data collection and monitoring may become skewed or incomplete, and technology-based solutions could unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities.	UNICEF will promote inclusive digital infrastructure and affordable connectivity, particularly in rural and underserved areas. It will develop low-tech and no-tech alternatives to ensure continuity of learning and services, and will build digital literacy and online safety awareness among children, caregivers, and educators.
Public Health Emergencies and Service Disruption: Epidemics and health emergencies disrupt access to essential services, including immunization, nutrition, and mental health support.	Disruptions in essential services will lead to increased child mortality, morbidity, and mental health challenges.	Service delivery and monitoring will be constrained by overwhelmed systems and mobility restrictions, shifting focus to emergency health responses.	UNICEF will continue to prioritize organizational and global leadership in the health outbreaks initiative in partnership with WHO and Governments, focusing on rebuilding health systems and equipping partners for public health emergencies.

Annex

Programmatic strategies that complement the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026-2029

- **UNICEF Gender Equality Action Plan, 2026–2029**: 2025-32-UNICEF-Gender-Equality-Action-Plan-EN-ODS.PDF
- **UNICEF Strategy for Health 2016–2030**: https://www.unicef.org/media/119736/file/UNICEF-Strategy-for-Health-2016-2030.pdf
- **UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030**: https://www.unicef.org/media/106511/file/%20Nutrition%20Strategy%202020-2030%20(Document)%20-%202021%20Edition..pdf
- **UNICEF Programme Guidance for Early Childhood Development**: https://www.unicef.org/documents/unicef-programme-guidance-early-childhood-development
- **UNICEF Global Multisectoral Operational Framework for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support of Children, Adolescents and Caregivers across Settings:** https://www.unicef.org/reports/global-multisectoral-operational-framework
- **UNICEF Strategy for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 2016–2030**: https://www.unicef.org/media/91266/file/UNICEF-Strategy-for-WASH-2016-2030.pdf
- **UNICEF Education Strategy 2019–2030**: https://www.unicef.org/media/59856/file/UNICEF-education-strategy-2019-2030.pdf
- **UNICEF Global Social Protection Programme Framework:** https://www.unicef.org/media/64601/file/Global-social-protection-programme-framework-2019.pdf
- **UNICEF Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy (DIPAS) 2022–2030**: https://www.unicef.org/unicef-disability-inclusion-policy-and-strategy-dipas-2022-2030
- **UNICEF Child Protection Strategy 2021–2030**: https://www.unicef.org/media/104416/file/Child-Protection-Strategy-2021.pdf
- **UNICEF Sustainability and Climate Change Action Plan 2023–2030**: https://www.unicef.org/media/148816/file/UNICEF%20SCAP%202023-2030.pdf
- **UNICEF Data for Children Strategic Framework:** https://data.unicef.org/resources/data-children-strategic-framework/