2020 was a challenging year for Jordan. The country’s more than 4 million children faced a year where their learning and psychosocial wellbeing was challenged. 2020 was a year where poverty rose, violence increased, and health care became difficult to access.

Having already faced lower than normal economic growth over the previous three years, it is expected that the Jordanian economy will have contracted 5.5 percent in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. With the reduction in taxation and the additional COVID-19 related expenditure the fiscal deficit of the central government almost doubled to 4 percent of the GDP in the first five months of the 2020 and public debt grew to 105.3 percent of GDP by May 2020[2]. This economic contraction seriously confines the government’s ability to further invest in children in the short term.

In 2019, it was estimated that 1 million Jordanians lived under the poverty line and one in five children were multidimensionally poor. Approximately 300,000 Jordanians lived just above the poverty line and could only remain there because they received support from the government (Cash support, food assistance, etc.)[3]. It is estimated that that the number of Jordanians living below the poverty line almost doubled in the initial 3 months of Covid-19 (from 15.4 to 26 percent)[4]. Temporary emergency support from the government was able to alleviate almost a third of the increase after the initial spike in poverty. Nevertheless, the pandemic brought the number of children living in poverty above a million.

Until the COVID-19 crisis, learning outcomes had been improving, although significant inequalities remained by gender and nationality.[5] However, school closures, impacting 2.37 million children and adolescents[6], have brought the risk of increased learning inequality and drop out, particularly for the poorest children, those living in informal tented settlements, refugees and those with disabilities.

Children in early adolescence are at greatest risk of not completing their education, often being forced to drop out of education due to poverty and adopting negative coping mechanisms such as child labor and child marriage.

The Government of Jordan moved swiftly to enable distance learning during COVID-19. Collaborating with the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship, along with private sector entities including Edraak and Abwaab, the Ministry of Education (MOE) developed remote learning platforms including Darsak, an e-learning portal with video courses for Grades 1-12 in line with the national curriculum, while also televising lessons nationally. The MOE also launched Jo Teachers, a web landing page hosting professional development courses. In partnership with UNICEF, MOE launched Learning Bridges, a blended learning programme targeting all one million children in Grade 4 to 9.

The Government estimates that nationally 89 percent of children have accessed DARSÅK, though this figure drops to 67 percent amongst vulnerable children (UNICEF survey). To date, there is a lack of data on children’s engagement with distance learning or learning progression during school closures.

Jordan is hosting approximately 662,000 registered Syrian refugees out of which almost 50 percent are children [7]. It is estimated that the total displaced Syrian population living in Jordan is 1,300,000 when including those unregistered. A child from a Syrian refugee family has a higher chance of being out-of-school (31.4 per cent vs. 2.9 per cent for a Jordanian child) and dropping out if attending school. Girls especially have a higher chance of being married before the age of 18 and many children fall victim to child labor. At least 78 percent of all Syrian refugees are living below the Jordanian poverty line[8] and are often facing deeper poverty than the Jordanian population. Before COVID-19, it was estimated that less than 40 percent of the Syrian refugees had employment, often seasonally or as day labors, sectors especially vulnerable to the economic downturn brought on by the pandemic.

Considerable progress has been seen in child protection over the last couple of years in establishment of a legislative framework, access to services and changing of behavior. However, the added stress that the COVID-19 pandemic put on society and especially the most vulnerable reversed some of these gains. The number of incidents reported to the Family Protection Department (FPD) increased by 33
percent during the Covid-19 lockdown and 66 percent of women reported that they feared physical and psychological violence. In a UNICEF study two-thirds of the households reported that they had difficulty in dealing with children at home during and after the lockdown, whereas only one-third of the parents reported that they were less tolerant towards their children.

Over the last decade the infant mortality rate has fallen from 18.6 to 13.9 per 1000 live births and under five mortality has dropped from 20.6 to 15.6[9]. However, although immunization is reaching 86 percent of the children in Jordan, significant geographical inequalities remain and especially Syrian refugee children living in mobile communities and Jordanians of ethnic minorities in remote areas, remain difficult to reach. Although the health sector was put under considerable strain by the COVID-19 pandemic it has so far been able to avoid being overwhelmed. However, during COVID-19 22 percent reported not seeking healthcare even if their child was seriously ill and 17 percent of the households reported that their children under 5 did not receive basic vaccines – the reason given for lack of seeking healthcare and vaccination was closure of clinics nearby, travel restrictions, and fear of COVID-19.

[8] UNICEF, “Geographic Multidimensional Vulnerability Analysis – Jordan” – The absolute poverty line is defined as an expenditure of less than JOD 67.80 per family member per month

Major contributions and drivers of results

The response to the pandemic tested all levels of resilience for everyone, but mostly the most vulnerable. Insuring that children were not left behind in this critical moment remained the central pillar of all UNICEF programmes. Unprecedented interruptions to the programming, required urgent recalibration.

Reaching the most vulnerable:

Through ongoing support, UNICEF facilitated the Government of Jordan’s rapid expansion of its social protection safety net (National Aid Fund - NAF) to effectively reach more vulnerable children and their families. UNICEF supported the enhancement of NAFs eligibility and targeting criteria, grounding it on multidimensional poverty indicators, and developed a Management Information System (MIS), including a two-way SMS platform to facilitate registration and communication with the beneficiaries on opening of mobile wallets, and processing of grievances. The support contributed to NAF expanding its coverage to an additional 25,000 households (bringing the programme to 54,500 households (over 180,000 children)), as well as providing a temporary emergency cash assistance programme supporting 241,000 daily wage workers (433,303 children).

As only Jordanian citizens remain eligible for the national social assistance programmes, UNICEF Jordan’s Hajati cash programme targeted vulnerable non-Jordanians, providing a recurrent school attendance related monthly cash transfer of 35 USD per child. Before the onset of COVID-19, UNICEF Jordan was supporting 11,435 children aged 6 to 15 (3,868 households), but expanded coverage temporarily to include an additional 18,804 children aged 0 to 18 in host communities and Informal Tented Settlements (ITS) (5,239 households) during the COVID-19 lockdown. Half of the
assisted children were girls, while 15 per cent of the children had a disability or chronic illness, and 30 per cent of the children belonged to female-headed households.

The pandemic reinforced the value of the Makani programme, particularly when it came to engaging the most vulnerable children in the extraordinary circumstances of prolonged lockdown and restricted movement. The network of 141 Makani centers (20 in camps, 70 in host communities and 51 in ITSs), and most importantly the relationship with staff and communities, allowed UNICEF to continue to reach over 150,000 vulnerable individuals, including over 115,000 children (55 per cent female) with an integrated package of services. The network of Makani staff communicated COVID-19 key messages on prevention and access to services; provided interactive homework support harmonized with the Jordanian formal online education platform; supported adolescent and youth well-being and built their stress management skills, as well as parental support through positive parenting and early childhood development (ECD) activities and messages.

Makani life skills curriculum continued to be delivered to young people by disseminating activities, videos, audio recordings, and texts through WhatsApp messaging groups. To provide the needed support at the beginning of the pandemic, UNICEF developed the ‘Life Skills Light’ package - a condensed package provided remotely to youth, focusing on the main skills needed to cope with stress, build resilience, and address challenges through positive actions and attitudes. Whenever the centers were open, adolescents and youth also had access to digital skills building in the Makani computer labs (more than 40 centres in host communities and camps have fully equipped computer labs).

To be able to continue to reach some of the children most at risk, child protection support shifted to remote case management. Although few new cases could be added during lockdown, remote services did manage to reach a total of 5,208 beneficiaries (47% females). To assist the case management personnel during these difficult circumstances, UNICEF supported the development of Guidelines for Referring cases and conducting Remote Case Management. Furthermore, UNICEF provided support to the existing help lines run by important partner as the Jordan River Foundation (JRF) and the International Medical Corps (IMC) to provide psychosocial support and other counseling services to children and their families. To build the child protection capacity of the Makani Centres, 30 Female Child Protection Facilitators were provided COVID-19 awareness sessions focusing on the medical and psychosocial awareness and how to communicate with and refer stressed parents and caregivers. A total of 77 CP and Learning Support Facilitators were also trained remotely on Psychosocial First Aid (PFA), and 10 CP and learning support facilitators were trained on identifying and responding to GBV cases.

During the first and last quarter of 2020, ECD services were provided through regular face to face modalities in host community centres. However, when the Makani centres had to close during the lockdown, support was provided through community-based WhatsApp messaging groups for caregivers, facilitated by ECD facilitators /community volunteers. The WhatsApp messaging groups provided guidance on nurturing care, child health and safety, and how to engage in meaningful interactions and included age-appropriate home-based learning activities, and children’s songs and stories, in addition to tips for parents on positive parenting and stress management (parents of children 0–18).

Ensuring a continuity of UNICEF supported services in refugee camps during the COVID-19 pandemic became even more critical. UNICEF scaled-up its support to around 120,000 Syrian refugees residing in 4 refugee camps (Za’atari, Azraq, King Abdullah Park and Emirati Jordanian Camps) to prevent, respond to and mitigate the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic on this vulnerable population[1]. The first positive COVID-19 cases were detected in the camps at the beginning of September amidst a surge of cases throughout the country. By the end of 2020, over 1,600 cases and 5 deaths had been recorded in camps. Socio-economic impacts have been particularly severe for camp refugees due to prolonged movement restrictions[2], the closure of all community and learning facilities[3] and restricted access to income-earning opportunities with documented consequences on food security levels and the use of negative coping strategies such as child labor and child marriage [4].

In the first six months, UNICEF’s response focused on Infection Prevention and Control (IPC), with camp-wide awareness campaigns focusing on hygiene promotion and health information, supported by
monthly distributions of hygiene and cleaning supplies and increased volumes of water. WASH infrastructure was urgently constructed in quarantine, isolation and COVID-19 treatment facilities, and training on IPC was provided to over 2,000 refugees working with UNICEF in schools and Makani Centers, key education personnel and members of the UNICEF-supported community disinfection teams. National support to the Ministry of Water and Irrigation (MOWI) was provided through innovative procurement and contracting modalities to provide emergency water trucking and municipal operations and maintenance services to water utilities, enabling essential water and sanitation services and IPC measures to be maintained during a critical period marked by restricted government cashflow, and increasing summer and Covid response driven water demand. From September, UNICEF stepped up support to families directly affected by COVID-19 or undergoing home or institutional isolation through the targeted distribution of critical hygiene and education materials and the provision of remote services, from case management to psychosocial support and Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF).

Throughout the year, UNICEF has worked to ensure continuity of all education and psychosocial services, including Makani, through remote access strategies ranging from digitization of content, provision of Internet data bundles (an average of 10,000 families in camps have been receiving 10 GB of Internet data every month since April), provision of support through social media using voice messages to overcome literacy barriers, and provision of printed materials and home-support for the most vulnerable such as children with disabilities and those with no access to smart devices or Internet. For children with disabilities, special permission was obtained by UNICEF to enable shadow teachers to continue to conduct monthly home visits until in September when this was stopped due to a rise in the number of COVID-19 cases. Nearly 1,000 children with disabilities have been served in Azraq and Za’atari refugee camps through this modality. In health, UNICEF scaled-up its support to partners to run critical pediatric and nutrition services in addition to providing Personal Protective Equipment to protect frontline health workers.

**Ensuring learning:**

In March, the Government of Jordan closed all schools, kindergartens and universities, impacting 2.37 million learners. All learning institutions have remained closed ever since except for a short period in September. Until the COVID-19 crisis, learning outcomes in Jordan had been improving, but significant inequalities remained. School closures have brought the risk of increased learning inequality and drop out, particularly for the poorest children, adolescent boys, those living in ITSs, refugees and those with disabilities.

At the onset of the pandemic, MOE reacted swiftly to minimize learning interruptions by developing, in cooperation with the private sector, a remote learning platform “Darsak”. The platform provides video courses for Grades 1-12 in line with the national curriculum[5], as well professional development courses for teachers focused on new technologies. While distance learning has the potential to provide students with access to continued learning at scale, technology solutions can only reach those who have internet connectivity, adequate data and appropriate devices. MOE data from November showed that 88.5 per cent of students in public schools have accessed Darsak. However, fewer children access DARSAK regularly or received feedback from their teachers, and data on learning progression is still not available. Furthermore, vulnerable groups, such as refugee children, and those living in temporary settlements have lower access.

UNICEF enabled remote learning by supporting MOE to continue the production of televised lessons and provided 200 laptops to enable teachers to connect with students. UNICEF also developed an Online Safeguarding Course with MOE for all adults working with children in formal and non-formal education, to mitigate the higher risk of cyberbullying or harassment due to more time spent online. To address the loss of learning, UNICEF and MOE launched Learning Bridges, a blended learning programme that is supporting up to one million children enrolled in Grade 4-9 to recover lost learning from the previous year, and accelerate learning in the new academic year, regardless of the availability of face to face teaching. Learning Bridges is a cross curricula programme, focusing on core learning objectives, adapted to support children whether learning remotely or classroom based. This innovative programme provides weekly printed learning activities distributed through schools, with additional
resources available online. 26,000 teachers completed a training to be able to capitalize on this resource. For children with limited or no access to the distance learning platforms, learning materials in Arabic and mathematics were distributed to over 12,000 Grade 1 to Grade 6 children in vulnerable areas including camps and temporary settlements. To enable continued learning of children with disabilities, UNICEF provided disability inclusive workbooks, adapted to each child’s learning plan, to nearly 1,500 children from KG2 to Grade 6 in camps and host communities (covering Arabic, mathematics, sensory and perceptual skills). These kits were supported by videos circulated to parents that support speech and occupational therapy with their child or children. To ensure that girls and women have equal access to the new digital economy, UNICEF is supporting the Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT). DOT is tailored to the needs of girls and young women and support them in bridging the gender digital divide and combats the double burden of COVID on girls and women. DOT is supporting access to digital livelihoods through the Impact Sourcing for Apprenticeship Opportunities programme. Of the 1036 participants enrolled in the basic and the advanced digital skills trainings 747 were women.

Evidence that COVID-19 has impacted the most vulnerable students is mounting. Immediately after the shift to online learning in March, over half of the 6,000s children enrolled in UNICEF-supported non-formal education (NFE) programming stopped participating due to a lack of parental support, technology or other stresses on the household due to COVID19. A targeted outreach since September has resulted in some of the children reenrolling. UNICEF and partners have been working to address barriers for NFE students through home visits, psychosocial support services for girls, printed materials for those without access to technology and support for girls at risk of child marriage. Through innovative approaches to bridge the digital divide for the most vulnerable, and enhance teacher skills and parental engagement in learning, UNICEF has sought to accelerate children’s learning recovery and minimize learning losses during the pandemic. These efforts will ensure that investments in the COVID19 emergency education response also support improvements in teaching and learning in the longer run whereby ensuring sustainability and ‘build back better’ in the education system. UNICEF has gathered evidence and practices to support remote learning during and after school closures in response to the COVID-19 crisis. A knowledge report on global good practice and lessons learned on remote learning was produced in cooperation with the UNICEF Regional Office for Middle East and North Africa. The report identified five major challenges that could arise from the school closures and a move to remote learning and provided solutions to address them. UNICEF also produced an Out-of-School Children Report that found that disparities in access to learning remained. Both research studies have been used by the MOE to inform policy and plans to prevent drop out and to ensure continued learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[1] Camp refugees’ particular vulnerability stems not only from the crowded living conditions and constrained access to livelihoods, but also from the profile of the population itself, with, for instance, 30% of households being female-headed and close to 60% of the population under 18.
[2] Whilst movement restrictions eased throughout the country after the initial 6-week lockdown, they remained in place for most of the year in the refugee camps, disrupting refugees’ access to the labor market.
[3] Schools in camps have followed the same protocols as outside of camps and have thus been closed for most of the calendar year. Community centers such as UNICEF’s Makanis on the other hand have been subjected to a different status and have been closed for most of the year despite being partially open elsewhere in the country.
[4] WFP’s Food Security Monitoring exercise released in December 2020 showed a more severe deterioration of the food security situation for camp refugees compared to others combined with an increase in the use of negative coping mechanisms.
[5] The online courses are also televised through two dedicated television channels.
UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF has worked closely with UN partners during the pandemic to provide guidance and help the government fighting misconception and change behaviors. UNICEF, WHO, and UNESCO have jointly issued “Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19” to provide guidance to the Government of Jordan and MOE on a risk-based approach to safe school opening. This informed the Ministry’s initial guidance on Safe School Operations (April 2020). In October 2020, a further Briefing Note based on this guidance was shared with the MOE and was used to inform the Education During Emergencies Plan as well as updated guidance for safe reopening of schools ahead of Semester 2.

In April 2020, the Government of Jordan approved a plan to expand by more than 230,000 new beneficiaries the National Aid Fund (NAF) and to improve its systems to effectively respond to the COVID crisis. A technical partnership UNICEF – World Bank facilitated the NAF strengthening by supporting NAF’s targeting improvements efforts, as well as the enhancements to their information system. In addition to provide the operational support needed to carry out the processes of identification, communication and registration of beneficiaries into the new programme.

One of the priorities in 2020 was to generate evidence on the immediate impact of the COVID-19 emergency to better inform the planning and programming of responses in the humanitarian and development sectors. In that sense, in April – May 2020, UNICEF produced in collaboration with WFP and UNHCR the Inter-Agency Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA), focused at the household-level and using a multi-sectoral approach covering a broad array of sectors including Health, Food Security, Livelihoods, Education, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, and Protection. Also, in partnership with the Jordan Strategy Forum (JSF) UNICEF produced the policy paper: Jordan’s National Social Protection response during COVID, which analyses the social protection responses to the COVID-19 crisis and highlights the challenges of each response and proposes policy recommendations for the way forward.

Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE)

From the initial days of the crisis up until today, UNICEF has worked with the Ministry of Health and WHO to implement a multi-sector, multi-partner risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) action plan to directly track misinformation and reinforce preventive behaviors. The plan seeks to ensure that all members of the community, including the most vulnerable, are being reached via all forms of communication. At its peak, UNICEF reached 5 to 7 million weekly views on social media, had convinced 100 social media influencers to lend their voices and platforms, had all 4 main TV channels (reaching an estimated 2 million daily) and more than 10 radio stations supporting the campaign (reaching between 1 to 3 million weekly). To reinforce the messages, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Awqaf to carry out a parental awareness programme which has reached 1.5 million and trainings for more than 400 community health/social workers and volunteers (virtually during the lockdown).

Lessons Learned and Innovations

COVID-19 and the restraints it has implied for programmes has triggered ample opportunity for innovation. UNICEF Jordan has noted some emergent lessons learned, especially in the area of community involvement, learning recovery and reimagining education, rethinking service delivery and building back better.

The importance of involving communities and families in programme implementation became more critical during the COVID response. Learning Bridges is an innovative approach to supporting children in overcoming learning loss caused by the pandemic as it supports learning at home through learning
packs with QR codes that offer blended learning opportunities. However, without the support of parents or caretakers at home, children are less likely to engage in or retain the learning from activities. Syrian Assistant Teachers and staff working at the Makani Centers and serving the communities in which they live, have been imperative in distributing learning material, supporting children with disability, and following up with at-risk children during UNICEF’s Safely-Back-to-School campaigns. The Makani centers demonstrated that a rapid response and provision of an enabling environment is central to continued service delivery during a crisis like COVID-19. By responding swiftly, the Makani centers were able to maintain contact to the most vulnerable communities and provide them with important support and services. Both frontline staff and the communities in which they operate responded positively and proactively, in part due to the enabling environment, producing creative and practical activities and solutions based on community needs. This allowed for quick bridging of emerging gaps in both host communities and in the camps.

Jordan has shown resilience in pursuing development goals despite regional volatility, fiscal constraints, and economic shocks. While there has been progress to strengthen the national social protection system, a major lesson learnt in 2020 is the importance of further investment in emergency preparedness. The development of a shock-responsiveness social protection system for Jordan should take not only take gender needs and vulnerabilities into account but focus on system preparedness and more durable mechanisms for all three pillars of the national system outlined in the NSPS 2019-2025: Opportunity (decent work/social security), Empowerment (social services), and Dignity (social assistance). To strengthen the maturity of the social protection sector to be able to provide a rapid and better coordinated shock-response, synergies and harmonization between the humanitarian and the national systems should be considered. In Parallel, the use of economic modelling should be institutionalized to understand how the economy might react to shocks, or changes in policy, to be able to understand the implications for different social groups and inform responses.

By implementing a pre-COVID-19 rapid response assessment, UNICEF identified the most readily available communication tools, to stay connected to beneficiaries and rapidly provide critical services, through a modality that was familiar and acceptable to a wide range of beneficiaries. WhatsApp has proven especially effective in providing community-based groups for parents. Aided by early childhood development facilitators/community volunteers these WhatsApp groups helped address the anxiety and insecurity parents and their young children felt during the pandemic by promoting positive interactions, stimulation to promote early development, communication, and disciplining practices.

Using new technology to deal with Jordan extreme water shortage, UNICEF Jordan supported the development and launch of the Jordan Ministry of Water and Irrigation official mobile application or “Water App”, a mobile application that brings together water utilities and customers in a common platform. The application, launched in July 2020, allows the public across the country to report any water network leakages or issues with the water and wastewater systems directly to the managing water utility maintenance crews, and digitalizes services, provided by water utilities companies in Jordan (Aqaba, Miyahuna and Yarmouk). The application contributes to improved customer satisfaction and trust between customers and service providers, as well as improving poor non-revenue water rates due to timely reporting and maintenance of leaking water infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic does not impact boys and girls equally and collection of sex aggregated data is therefore also important in evaluating the gendered impacts of the pandemic, like economic vulnerability and dependence, early marriage, exposure to domestic violence, etc. As most interaction such as schooling etc. move online and become less accessible for girls and women, data becomes more important in evaluating the differences in access. The collection of sex disaggregated data has enabled UNICEF to better estimate the needs faced by the Jordanian girls and women.

A challenge this year has been that UNICEF, because of the programmatic calibration due to COVID 19, had to be put planned activities on hold. In many of the UNICEF programme areas the delivery targets had to be scaled back as the delivery moved to new modalities. The TVET programmes which usually reaches close to 2,000 adolescent and youth per year had to be transformed, to focus on new and emerging sectors (such as digital and computing) and moved online and with blended learning, which meant that the programme was not able to achieve its target. The child protection programme
was only able to achieve 44 percent (6,653) of the planned target (15,000) on Child protection specialized services for boys and girls as the programme had to move from face to face to online services. In the health sector the immunization programme as disrupted as the children became more difficult to reach and the focus of the health worker moved to the response to the pandemic. In the education sector activities linked to the system strengthening, licensing and accreditation, the teachers and NFE Facilitators professional development, and the instructional leadership trainings were delayed. Evidence generation was also disrupted as data collection became more difficult. The Multidimensional Child Poverty in Jordan and the Joint Comprehensive Vulnerability Analysis was both delayed as the priorities of the Government shifted to COVID-19. COVID-19 also meant additional challenges to the operation of UNICEF Jordan. With the prolonged lockdown and the frequent closure of key government offices, interaction in areas such as clearance and protocol became more difficult and the prolonged closure of the airport in Amman had an impact on overall staff welfare.