Update on the context and situation of children

In 2020, progress in the Maldives – as in other parts of the world – was confronted by the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ongoing impact of the pandemic has the potential to stall four decades of rapid growth in the country. This growth propelled by high-end tourism, has allowed the Maldives to grow from least-developed to upper-middle income status within a very short time. With an ongoing commitment to health and education for all, communicable diseases, illiteracy and extreme poverty have largely been eliminated.

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 as a pandemic. On the following day, Minister of Health announced an initial 30-day State of Public Health Emergency. As a result, schools, universities, parks and cinemas were closed; travel restrictions were imposed on visitors from certain countries; and quarantine and testing facilities were established. Government institutions closed shortly after, on 17 March. On 15 April, with the first identified case of community transmission, the capital city of Male’ went into a complete lockdown for two months. By late May, the Maldives had recorded a total of 1,457 cases of COVID-19, and five deaths.

UNICEF MCO was able to rapidly transition from ongoing upstream regular programme engagement to an urgent humanitarian response. From mid-March, UNICEF was actively involved in the National Emergency Response Coordination for COVID-19, a multisectoral Government led platform.

The full economic and social impact of the pandemic is, as yet, unknown. However, evidence gathered over the course of 2020 suggests that the measures taken in response to the pandemic, such as school closures and the lockdown in Malé, may disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups. For example, most of those who normally work from home – and who are far more likely to be women than men- — earn less than US$ 10 per day. These people were more likely to give up their paid work during lockdown, as a result of increased domestic responsibilities. In addition, while overall household resources have, in many cases, decreased, women are more likely than men to be affected by this.

The Maldives, as an upper-middle-income country, no longer receives significant levels of overseas development aid. From 2015 to 2017, the Maldives received an average of US$ 30 million in aid each year, mainly in the form of loans from sources within the region, such as the Asian and Islamic Development Banks, accompanied by bilateral assistance from Australia, Japan and Kuwait. The World Bank has also been a major contributor to socio-economic development.

The Maldives is distinguished by its substantial budgetary commitment to the Sustainable Development Goal priorities. However, the country still faces a number of challenges, which are likely to become more severe as the impact of the pandemic is felt. The development and economic status of the Maldives, while much improved, is fragile due to the heavy dependence on tourism. The country remains at high risk of debt distress in the medium term. Unemployment in some groups – particularly women (5.6% HIES 2019) and youth (around 25%) – is high. Social and gender inequalities are increasing, as is the gap between rich and poor, and between the capital and the Atolls.

This latter issue is partly a result of the particular geography of the Maldives, on which its growth, in the form of the tourism (which accounted for 73.4 per cent of GDP in 2017) and fisheries industries, greatly depends. Ensuring equitable and inclusive development across the archipelago’s 1,200 islands is challenging. In the Atolls, 10.4 per cent of the population lives below the US$ 1.25 poverty line, compared to just 1.5 per cent of the population in Malé. Migration from the Atolls to the capital has led
to increasing urbanization of the greater Malé area and rural depopulation. While the financial burden of poverty in the Maldives has declined, due to enhanced government spending on health, education and social protection, efforts are now being focused towards minimizing the gap in the quality of service provision between urban and rural communities.

Despite progress in many areas, women, children, youth, and migrants in the Maldives face significant marginalization. Exclusion factors, such as living in the Atolls or a rural area, living with disabilities, substance abuse, coming from a dysfunctional family or simply being poor, can contribute to the vulnerabilities of these groups.

Rapid urbanization has placed a strain on the people. Domestic violence, gender inequality, youth disengagement and gang violence have been linked to a lack of adequate housing and social support for families. A total of 1,770 cases of violence against children were reported during the year. The government is committed to formulating policies and enabling systems to address these issues.

The Maldives commitment to universal healthcare has resulted in an ongoing decline in maternal, child and neonatal mortality rates. For this to continue, additional investment in neonatal care and birth defect prevention is needed. Evidence suggests a double burden of malnutrition (overnutrition, i.e., overweight/obesity and undernutrition, i.e., stunting/wasting.)

All children in the Maldives are now guaranteed 14 years of free education. Ninety-nine per cent of children are enrolled in primary education. One remaining area for improvement is in the preparation of young people for employment. In the Atolls, this is hindered by limited access to higher-secondary education. This often means that some children end their schooling early and may engage in risky behaviour or migrate to the capital, where they become vulnerable.

Over 86,000 children were affected by school closures. The consequent learning loss is unknown but is expected to be huge. Children with disabilities, pre-primary and primary school children are expected to be particularly affected by the break in in-person learning, while an increased number of adolescents may drop out of school.

In early November 2020, movement restrictions in the Maldives were eased due to low numbers of confirmed cases of COVID-19. Parks, museums and other public spaces reopened. By the end of November, however, the previously suppressed COVID-19 case numbers were beginning to increase again.

Major contributions and drivers of results

In 2020, UNICEF Maldives Country Office (MCO) was able to effectively transition from ongoing policy work to a lifesaving humanitarian response. In the face of a rapidly changing situation, UNICEF MCO quickly became established as a key player in the country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, achieving strategic results and successfully linking the humanitarian response with development goals. In all measured outputs and outcomes, the Country Office made significant progress, with clear positive results. Some of these key results are described here.

Health and Nutrition

At the beginning of 2020, UNICEF MCO supported implementation of the Social and Behaviour Change Communication Strategy on nutrition. However, as some of the key activities were postponed due to COVID-19, UNICEF MCO refocused its attention on developing resources in preparation for
the launch of the campaign in 2021. UNICEF MCO also supported the development of resources and guidelines on breastfeeding during COVID-19, which were distributed to all 189 health facilities and 21 hospitals around the country. These resources were intended to inform mothers and caregivers about breastfeeding and on providing a healthy diet to young children.

In January 2020, the Maldives declared an outbreak of measles following one confirmed case of the disease. UNICEF MCO supported the national response, including donating vaccines and leading public communication for the Measles-Rubella vaccination campaign. UNICEF MCO also helped to create demand for the vaccine by developing a Supplementary Immunization Activity communication plan and preparing key messages and resources.

The capital island went to full lock-down during April 2020. Subsequently, the essential health services including the routine vaccination and nutrition services came to a standstill for three weeks in Male’. During the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF MCO advocated for continued, undisrupted maternal and child health services – including supporting mobile medical trips to islands to conduct prenatal check-ups for over 160 pregnant women who could not access hospitals due to the lockdown in Malé. Over 5,000 children and women received essential healthcare, including immunization, through UNICEF-supported health facilities. In late 2020, UNICEF MCO and partner agencies supported the Government in preparing for the introduction of the COVID vaccine in the Maldives. Further, key messages within health and nutrition aspect on early childhood development focusing on critical elements of nurturing and responsive care in the context of COVID-19 were disseminated on social media. The messages included information on child development, effect on children due to lock-down as well as parenting tips to be sensitive and responsive to children’s emotional needs.

UNICEF MCO used existing partnerships to improve access to high-quality Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services for women, children, adolescents, and their families. These services improved the MHPSS capacity of frontline workers, particularly in school settings, with the Maldives Red Crescent (MRC) training approximately 6,000 teachers in Psychological First Aid, aiming to sensitize teachers to the psychosocial needs of students during lockdown and safe return to schools.

**Education**

In the Maldives, over 86,000 students were impacted by school closures resulting from the pandemic. UNICEF MCO supported the Ministry of Education (MoE) in training 3,885 teachers in online learning, leading to reach a total of 54,218 students. UNICEF also supported televised lessons, reaching 68,720 children. UNICEF was able to identify children with special needs in the Greater Male’ area and provide them with the resources needed for home schooling during the lockdown period.

UNICEF MCO supported the MoE with a back-to-school campaign and in the safe reopening of schools, including by providing IPC supplies. At the time of reporting, 63 per cent of students had returned to safe in-person learning. UNICEF MCO continues to work with the MoE to monitor learning continuity, the safe return to school and tracking of the most vulnerable students. In the Maldives, adolescent boys are more at risk of getting disengaged in learning and dropping out of school and is speculated to be the result of lack of parental support and supervision for boys, lack of appropriate gender sensitive, psycho-social services and gender blind teaching learning practices.

UNICEF MCO supported the MoE in customizing the Maldives Education Management Information System (MEMIS) to facilitate the monitoring of the COVID-19 response in education; which was successfully used to monitor reach, access and engagement in learning during the pandemic.
Under the strategy of mobilizing partnerships for skills development of adolescents and young people, UNICEF MCO partnered with a local airline, Manta Air, to provide internships to a total of six young graduates in the airline industry. This pilot programme for both UNICEF and Manta Air, was almost complete when the COVID-19 health emergency was declared affecting the prospects of the interns getting jobs and further training in the industry. Nevertheless, the internship created avenues for the interns to familiarise themselves with the range of job opportunities, while receiving hands-on experience with the airline.

In partnership with MRC and the Local Council in Addu City, UNICEF MCO initiated and completed an alternative, vocational learning programme for Out of School Children, in 2020, and 10 out of the 20 students enrolled in the Certificate Course in Aquatic Recreation (water sports), completed the programme and earned a certificate from the Professional Association of Diving Instructors. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, the graduates have so far been unable to find employment.

Throughout 2020, UNICEF MCO continued its long-term commitment to improving the policies for inclusive, quality education, leading to the launching of The Inclusive Education Policy and strategic action plan for operationalizing inclusive education in 2020. UNICEF MCO also provided input to the Education Bill, ratified in 2020.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

The UNICEF MCO provided urgently needed IPC supplies to schools and healthcare facilities, by procuring and delivering IPC and WASH supplies, including cleaning products, hand soap, hand sanitizers, surface disinfectants, gloves and masks, to 25 healthcare facilities and 214 Government schools. Around 70,000 students and teachers, and 1,000 health workers and patients benefitted from these supplies. The country office also provided 44 handwashing stations to 22 disadvantaged schools. Despite the pandemic-situation, UNICEF MCO marked the Global Handwashing day on 15 October 2020, to increase public awareness of hand hygiene during COVID-19 and beyond, and initiated the development of a road map to implement the Global Hand Hygiene Initiative, in partnership with the relevant stakeholders.

Child Protection

Along with responding to protection needs during the COVID-19 emergency, UNICEF MCO continued its support for strengthening the child protection system by ensuring that these responses contributed to longer-term development.

UNICEF MCO provided technical and/or financial support to the Government for a variety of purposes: to the Presidential Commission to inquire into Child Rights Violations; to the Juvenile Court, for drafting of key regulations; to the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services (MoGFSS), to strengthen the Child Helpline system, and to enhance the capacity of 77 Social Workers through improved clinical supervision; the Maldives Police Services (MPS) to enhance the functionality and decentralization of the Hotline system used by the public to report incidents of violence, and seek help. Along with the Child Helpline, providing access to a safe and accessible channel to report sexual exploitation and abuse to a total of 1,368 women and children, this service should ultimately improve record keeping, produce a clearer picture of violence against children in the country and decrease response times to incidents of violence.

UNICEF MCO is supporting the Government in developing a national campaign on preventing sexual violence against children and women, covering four areas: 1) addressing negative social norms and
values, 2) breaking the silence and empowering survivors, 3) strengthening response services, and 4) expediting justice for survivors.

UNICEF MCO is continuing its support for establishment of Community Social Groups (CSGs) to prevent and respond to cases of all forms of violence, including violence against children. UNICEF MCO’s high-level advocacy ensured that the Government adopted the CSGs as a reliable mechanism to reach the most vulnerable groups of people and families. In a key achievement, UNICEF MCO supported the drafting of a Regulation that is expected to be published, by end of the first quarter of 2021. This regulation will formalize the roles and responsibilities of the CSG members, providing a legal basis for their work.

With a local NGO, UNICEF MCO marked World Day for the Prevention of Child Abuse and World Children’s Day. A total of 24 students from 18 schools participated. In line with this year’s focus on ‘Kids Takeover’, children were briefed about violence against children and the availability of Child Protection services in the Maldives. The children interviewed government stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the situation before presenting their recommendations for improvement at a high-level plenary. The contributions from the programme is contributing to the intervention outlined in the sexual violence against children and women campaign.

**Social Policy and Social Protection**

During the lockdown in Malé, movement restrictions severely impacted the livelihoods of those surviving on daily wages, placing children of these families at high risk of malnutrition. In response, in a joint initiative with multiple stakeholders, UNICEF MCO mobilized resources and engaged with key partners to provide lifesaving emergency food assistance to the most vulnerable families with children. A total of 691 families with children were provided with food baskets during the lockdown. Of these, nearly 300 were people with disabilities and around 400 were single parents. Additionally, UNICEF MCO assisted the MoGFSS to provide humanitarian assistance, including accommodation and food, to more than 300 people who were stranded in Malé for over a month due to the lockdown.

UNICEF MCO advocated for an emergency targeted child grant of MVR 1,000 per household for a period of three to four months to support households with children aged under five affected by the pandemic. The recommendations were submitted by the National Social Protection Agency (NSPA) as a concept note to the President’s office for the establishment of a universal Child Grant.

In 2020, the MCO focused on institutionalization of the country’s first-ever Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). With the high-level advocacy efforts of UNICEF, the NSPA and the National Bureau of Statistics officially launched the MPI in February 2020. In addition to relying on the MPI for the COVID-19 response, the Maldives Government is currently using it to determine the multidimensional vulnerability of children and their families in the country. The NSPA has already used the MPI to re-base the calculation of various social protection benefits for eligible beneficiaries.

UNICEF MCO continued supporting further updates to the National Civil Vital Registration System, and has provided technical support to the Local Government Authority in training government officials on the new online software for the system.

**Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfers**

In 2020, UNICEF MCO ensured effective disbursement of funds through adherence to the Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfers (HACT) policy. At the beginning of the pandemic, the MCO assessed existing partnerships to understand the context of programming, the monitoring of funds in terms of
grant expiry and conditionality, and the modalities that could be used during the emergency.

In 2020, the MCO signed seven partnership agreements with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

A total of six training sessions were held for new and existing Implementing Partners as part of the measures that were taken to address the capacity gaps identified regarding the HACT procedures. The MCO continued to monitor assurance activities throughout the year; however, these were halted during the lockdown period from April to June and were limited from July to August due to the closure of Government offices.

**External Relations**

UNICEF MCO engaged in advocacy with high profile public figures (including the First Lady, ministers, religious leaders) and the media to direct focus towards the impacts of the pandemic on children and families, and to ensure the availability of essential services for children. Among other activities, UNICEF MCO collaborated with the First Lady to produce four advocacy videos on the importance of being compassionate and caring during the lockdown.

UNICEF MCO worked with partners to conduct online training for journalists on ethical reporting during emergencies, child-sensitive reporting, fact checking and handling misinformation or disinformation around COVID-19. UNICEF MCO partnered with the HEOC to hold a Kids Takeover of the COVID-19 press briefing to mark World Children’s Day 2020.

In collaboration with key partners, UNICEF MCO engaged with the local population to both highlight socioeconomic issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as sexual abuse and mental health issues, and to minimize the impacts of these issues on children.

Despite the focus on the response to the pandemic, the MCO was able to begin detailed planning for the development of the new country programme, which included setting out a timeline to be finalized in early 2021.

**Operations Management**

Throughout 2020, the UNICEF MCO Operations team provided quality support services to facilitate smooth office functioning and timely programme implementation, in overall governance, human resources, administration, finance, information communication and technology, procurement and security. Procurement of over US$ 3.0 million supplies for required emergency response, was unprecedented, compared to less than US$ 700,000 in 2019. The MCO also procured supplies worth US$ 797,929 for the Government, on behalf of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Close collaboration with the programme team ensured clear and accurate cash management, fund forecasts, and efficient disbursement of funds, even against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, with the understanding that ensuring a strong focus on staff wellbeing was important, flexible working arrangements were developed by tailoring work assignments to individual staff needs. The MCO also continues to maintain the proper safety standards as per the safety guidelines for workplaces during COVID-19.

**Programme Coordination**

Programme coordination at MCO fully focused towards the humanitarian response to COVID-19
pandemic. UNICEF MCO expanded its existing partnerships and significantly scale-up its operations, continuing to engage with high-profile public figures, as well as political and religious leaders, government ministries and CSOs.

UNICEF MCO led key stakeholders, including the government and other UN agencies, in the development of the Risk Communication and Community Engagement Plan (RCCE), which became the main framework for public messaging and outreach used by all the stakeholders in the country. The RCCE allowed UNICEF and other UN agencies to reach around 380,000 people affected by the pandemic, through social media.  

Along with the emergency humanitarian response, the UNICEF MCO continued to prepare for the new country programme (now due to be designed in 2021) using the findings of the three evaluations carried out in the past 2 years which contributed to the UN Common Country Assessment, ensuring that child rights issues are appropriately addressed. Furthermore, findings from these evaluations and the on-going evaluations and assessments will contribute to the development of the new Country Programme 2022-2026.

2020 brought many opportunities, as well as challenges. Overall, while many of the MCO’s COVID response related activities in 2020 were unforeseen, the MCO had many notable achievements over the course of the year. Along with its partners, UNICEF MCO was able to learn valuable lessons in programming which will further help to improve responses in the coming months and years, including emergency preparedness/humanitarian response elements in the next programme cycle.
UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

The partnerships established by UNICEF played a crucial role in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020. UNICEF MCO was able to utilize existing partnerships and establish new effective working relationships with other organizations, by successfully partnering with additional government departments (14), other UN agencies (03), IFIs (01), CSOs (06) and private sector companies (04).

UNICEF MCO’s main partner in the nutrition programme is the Health Protection Agency (HPA). Additionally, the UNICEF and WHO MCOs are providing ongoing support to the Ministry of Health (MoH) to prepare the country for the introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine.

UNICEF remains a long-standing, trusted collaborator of the MoE. Using the GPE-Accelerated Funding UNICEF supported MoE in implementing the COVID-19 response, including the Education Response Plan for COVID-19 and other planned development interventions MoE. At the time of developing the plan, UNICEF MCO advocated for gender responsive COVID-19 responses in education. UNICEF MCO also partnered with NGOs to provide continuity of learning and psychosocial support for children with disabilities and ensured gender responsive interventions. UNICEF MCO facilitated the National Institute of Education in completing the review of pre-primary and key stage one of the national curricula with a focus on simplifying the content and addressing gender stereotypes and gender discriminatory content.

UNICEF MCO partnered with MoGFSS, NSPA, Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment and Malé City Council to provide food to the needy families with children, during the lockdown in Malé. Additionally, UNICEF MCO partnered with Male’ City Council, MoE and MoH for the WASH response.

UNICEF MCO continued to work closely with CSO partners to change negative attitudes, behaviors and practices and to ensure protection of children’s rights. UNICEF MCO continues to engage with the Executive and Legislative branches of the government to make meaningful changes in existing laws and regulations and strengthen the system to protect children’s rights.

UNICEF MCO regularly engaged with the World Bank and the ADB on the emerging COVID-19 situation and preparedness for the introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine. UNICEF MCO also supported the procurement of medical equipment and items needed for the COVID-19 response on behalf of the ADB.

UNICEF MCO continued working with relevant public institutions and MRC to enhance child protection systems. UNICEF MCO is working in partnership with the NGOs Hope for Women, Advocating the Rights of the Child (ARC) and Thiba Psychology to provide one-on-one mental health support via online platforms to children affected by violence across the country. UNICEF MCO partnered with the NGO, Women in Tech, to create awareness among children, parents, and teachers for the safety of children during online learning.

UNICEF MCO scaled up its partnership with ARC, and established formal agreements with MRC, the Society for Health Education (SHE), and the Center for Mental Health to expand mental health and psychosocial support services. Through a long-term agreement, UNICEF MCO has engaged with the International Policy Center to prepare a concept paper for the introduction of a universal Child Grant in the Maldives.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

While 2020 provided many challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic also led to unprecedented
opportunities for learning and innovation. UNICEF MCO was able to rapidly switch focus from ongoing policy and development work to an urgent humanitarian response, including managing increased emergency funding and scaled-up operations. Lessons were learnt and insights achieved across all areas of work, allowing UNICEF MCO to better reach and support the most vulnerable children and families, immediately and in the future. Some of the key lessons are described below.

**Policy**

UNICEF MCO needs to strengthen capacity of the education sector to prepare for and respond to emergencies. During the COVID-19 response, UNICEF MCO recognized the need for policymakers to better understand the inequities that exist between schools in different locations, and the importance of continuity of learning during emergencies. This also includes a better understanding of an inclusive approach to identifying and addressing learning loss.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the risks associated with the Maldives’ dependence on food imports and consequent negative impacts on food security. While the tourism and construction sectors are thriving, UNICEF MCO needs to explore other sectors, such as agriculture and fisheries, for skills development and employment of young people.

Through high-level and timely engagement with key policymakers, UNICEF MCO enabled positive changes to the child protection system – this is particularly significant in the context of COVID-19, which exposed significant institutional gaps. UNICEF MCO learned that involving high level leadership is a faster and more effective way to achieve results from advocacy efforts.

**Technology and online outreach**

In education, UNICEF MCO expanded the use of innovative technology during the pandemic, and capacitated 54 percent of teachers in Government schools with online teaching skills. Online learning also helped children and parents to develop digital literacy skills, strengthening the system’s resilience and preparedness for future emergencies.

From community-based online sessions on children’s mental health and emotional resilience, UNICEF MCO learned that a fully functional online support system is necessary to reach the most vulnerable groups and provide them with relevant services, especially during a public health emergency. UNICEF MCO continued its engagement with the First Lady, who is also the Child Rights Champion, bringing increased attention to violence against children across the country.

In external relations, UNICEF MCO’s online engagement channels proved to be highly effective in reaching many with limited effort, especially in a geographically scattered country like the Maldives. Social and electronic media were used to convey lifesaving messages and engage with key stakeholders including children, to create awareness on child rights and challenges faced due to COVID-19, and to invite views on improving the pandemic response of UNICEF Maldives.

**Data**

The need for high frequency monitoring and reporting of results during the COVID-19 emergency revealed limitations of government systems for data collection and use in an emergency. This prompted the realization that the MCO and its government counterparts were unprepared for planning, monitoring and reporting in situations where the programme focus must switch from longer-term policy work to short-term life-saving interventions. The country office has begun a gap analysis of the existing government system and is supporting the related departments with training for staff and development of data collection tools.
In addition, the lack of a functional health information management system affected the ability of the Government and other partners to obtain real-time data on service access, coverage and monitoring of essential health indicators. The delays in developing the DHIS-II system created severe challenges in monitoring health services and responding efficiently and effectively to the emerging COVID-19 situation.

**Logistics**

With the decision by the government and UNICEF to provide food baskets to vulnerable families during lockdown, it became evident that the necessary items were not readily available from a single supplier. This took time to address. The lesson learned was that appropriate logistical arrangements for any emergency operation are crucial and should be implemented as the top priority. Prior identification of service providers and potential suppliers could make a huge impact.

For smaller country offices, without prior service delivery experience, shifting gears to immediately transition from upstream policy support to a humanitarian response is extremely challenging, unless there is timely technical and financial support from the Regional Office and HQ. In such a situation, country offices should proactively reach out to seek advice and the Regional Office should also immediately contact the country offices without waiting for them to ask for help.

**Human resources and funding**

UNICEF’s swift change to emergency programming was crucial in meeting the Government’s needs in a continuously changing situation. UNICEF addressed unmet HR needs when the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted HR gaps in the health system in the Maldives, particularly at the central level. For example, the country office placed a dedicated technical consultant within the HPA nutrition programme, which proved to be instrumental in continuing critical work supported by UNICEF, including programme monitoring during the COVID-19 response.

UNICEF mobilized funds to address emerging demands, such as the requirement for cold chain equipment. The pandemic underscored the need for an adequately funded and resourced health programme in the Maldives, and the need to scale-up support as necessary.

MCO’s ability to promptly change from developmental work to emergency programming allowed UNICEF to support critical Government responses. Increased funding was instrumental to support critical areas during the pandemic response in health, education, social protection and child protection sectors. The increased scale-up in provision of supplies has significantly helped to strengthen systems in the long-term. For example, the procurement of medical supplies and vaccine cold chain equipment will continue to benefit beyond the COVID-19 response.

COVID-19 also highlighted critical gaps in areas such as Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services, and the need for comprehensive programming. The timely support provided by UNICEF to key partners has led to expansion of services, and underscored the need for dedicated programming in the future. Further, it also highlighted the importance of factoring these new areas of work in the continued COVID responses in 2021, in order to build sustainable systems for continued services.