

## Mexico

### Update on the context and situation of children

The first year of UNICEF Mexico's Country Programme 2020-2025 was marked by COVID-19 pandemic combined with a complex political, social and economic context. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, GDP shows a 8.9% contraction in 2020 and an expected return to 2018 levels only in 2024. The lack of robust fiscal support measures for consumers and businesses in 2020-21 will cause permanent losses to income. In this environment, business activity will struggle to return to pre-crisis levels, affecting private consumption amid slow job growth. Also, the government's erratic stance on private investment will continue to weigh on investor confidence. This will dampen any recovery in investment, already declining before COVID-19. (1)

The direct effects of COVID-19 on children have followed a similar pattern as in other countries, accounting for 3.3% of total number of cases, 3.8% being children with obesity. The death rate of children due to COVID-19 is at 0.9%. The ENCOVID-19 Survey conducted by UNICEF Mexico and EQUIDE illustrated the wider impact of COVID-19 on children, showing that 32.3% of households with children reported a decrease in their income since the start of the pandemic, compared to 23% of households without children; 35.4% of people who suffer severe symptoms of anxiety live in households with two or more children, compared to 27.3% in households without them; 95% of households with middle or high income are able to access distance education, vs 85% of households with low income, which exacerbates inequality in terms of learning. Food security in households with children is at 21.1%, compared to 33.3% without them.

Domestic violence increased in the context of the pandemic and social distancing measures. The UNICEF-supported 911 hotline reported a 28% increase in calls of domestic violence in the first two months of pandemic. By October 2020, the 911 calls reached over half a million, mostly about assaults in the family setting. The increase in violence was reflected also in the number of homicides and femicides. Violence, particularly against women and children, continues at an alarming rate. When comparing data on crimes from October 2019 and October 2020, there is a 41.6% increase in cases of sexual harassment; 23.1% in gender violence; 20.0% in femicide; 9.5 in domestic violence and 1.1% in rape. Violence against women is highly correlated to adolescent pregnancies, wherein for every 1,000 adolescents between the ages of 15 to 19 in Mexico, there were 70.5 pregnancies (6), of which almost half were unplanned. 370,050 births to mothers under 20 years of age were registered, of which 8,862 were to girls 10-14 years old. (7)

The pandemic has worsened Mexico's performance in certain well-being indicators of children and adolescents. Poverty rate among children, before the pandemic, was 50%; out of whom 9.3% live in extreme poverty. The pre-existing learning crisis, wherein 80% of students in primary education achieved only minimum levels of competency in reading, writing and mathematics; and at least 4 million out-of-school children and adolescents, are indicators of concern. The last Health and Nutrition Survey 2018-2019 showed that stunting among under-five children is stagnated at 14.2%, while obesity and overweight among children 5-11 years of age continued to increase to 35.5% in 2018. In addition, Mexico shows some setbacks in meeting the SDGs. According to the 2019 SDG Index, the country is in position number 78 (value 68.5) out of 162 countries, below the average for Latin America (value 77.7), and far behind the rest of the OECD countries. The greatest challenges are observed in the targets that relate to or directly affect child rights on development, well-being and protection. In particular, the stagnation in poverty reduction and universal access to minimum levels of social protection are of concern; as well as the targets in maternal, neonatal and infant mortality; levels of child obesity and overweight; adolescent pregnancy; access to inclusive, equitable and quality education for all; gender equality and the empowerment of all girls; equal opportunities and reduction of inequalities between population groups; as well as the reduction of all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation children.

Due to border movement restrictions, 2020 showed a reduction in the flows of migrant children but an

increase in returns. Between January and October, 9,872 children and adolescents were apprehended, (8) while nearly 200,000 people were expelled from the U.S. to Mexico between March and September, including 8,800 unaccompanied children who were sent back with inadequate protection screenings. (9) A similar situation occurred in Mexico's Southern Border, with 1,911 children (10) being returned to Central America in the same period.

On a positive note, Mexico's progress in education is remarkable. Coverage has grown in some levels, such as preschool education. A greater number of girls and boys attend school, stay there and graduate from compulsory educational levels, and the country is close to achieving gender parity in access to education at all levels. However, all these achievements have suffered an important setback since the closure of schools in March 2020 and with access to the internet and other distance learning modalities not being available, especially for children coming from low-income and poor families. Furthermore, the geographic, cultural and socioeconomic diversity of Mexico poses an enormous challenge to guarantee the full exercise of the right to education, exacerbated by inequality and structural poverty. Due to the pandemic, challenges have grown significantly in achieving universal access and completion and ensuring quality, equitable and inclusive education throughout the life cycle of children.

## FOOTNOTES

- (1) Country Report Mexico, January 2021. Economist Intelligence Unit. P.8
- (2) ENCOVID19Infancia. Accumulated analysis May-July 2020. UNICEF-EQUIDE.
- (3) Databases of the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Safety System. January-October 2020.
- (4) CONEVAL, 2018. Estimates based on MCS-ENIGH 2018.
- (5) ENSANUT 2018-2019. November 2020. INSP-INEGI.
- (6) ENADID 2018. INEGI.
- (7) INEGI, "Open data on births". Available at: <https://bit.ly/3fP8mqd>
- (8) Immigration Policy Unit. December 1, 2020 in <http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/CuadrosBOLETIN?Anual=2020&Secc=3>
- (9) UNHCR and UNICEF, "Families on the Run". December 17, 2020.
- (10) UNICEF LACRO's monitoring of countries' statistics.

## Major contributions and drivers of results

2020 was the first year of the new UNICEF six-year country programme, the implementation of which has been severely impacted by COVID-19 as of the second quarter of the year. As a result, the annual work plan for 2020 underwent modifications to fit into the current situation in Mexico, ensuring that UNICEF remains relevant to the country struggling with a major health emergency. The regular programme was combined with emergency response and a socioeconomic recovery plan with the following results:

Under Strategic Plan (SP) Goal Area 1 and according to the CPD Outcome 1, UNICEF Mexico played a key role in the adoption of a new front pack nutrition labelling in Mexico, through evidence generation, advocacy and technical support. The Mexican Official Norm NOM-51 on food and beverages labelling was modified to replace the Guideline Daily Amount (GDA) with new warning octagons and enforced since October 2020. This new Front Pack Nutrition Labeling (FPNL) is considered one of the best in the world to date. UNICEF Mexico also supported the Ministry of Health (MoH) through advocacy and technical support in the amendment of the General Health Law in November 2020, which now includes key UNICEF recommendations on promotion of breastfeeding in the first hour after giving birth in all health facilities; a ban on infant formula unless medically

necessary; and incentivization of breastfeeding in public spaces without limitations, which is a key gender win in terms of nutrition. A joint document of recommendations for decision makers to increase national efforts to address all forms of malnutrition was developed and launched by UNICEF, WHO/PAHO and FAO, with technical support from INSP and in partnership with the private sector company Beko. This unique initiative brings key UN Agencies together to speak and act as one in the fight against malnutrition in Mexico and will guide joint UN technical support and advocacy efforts in the years to come, in line with SDG 2 on zero hunger and SDG 3 on good health and well-being; UNSCDF Direct Effect 2 of on the fulfilment of the right to nutrition; and in adherence to the Axis 2 on social policy and programmes of the National Development Plan (NDP) 2019-2024.

As part of the response to COVID-19 and harnessing the potential of business as a knowledge source, UNICEF Mexico worked with the National Welfare Agency (DIF), Chedraui Foundation and Calimax Supermarkets in distributing nutritious food baskets and food vouchers to 37,000 families, directly benefiting 65,000 children, in five states most impacted by the pandemic. This collaboration has provided technical guidance, particularly to DIF for the longer-term food assistance programme of the Government of Mexico, as well as an opportunity to reach vulnerable families through a hygiene and COVID-prevention information campaign with communication on adequate infant and young child feeding practices.

Social and behavioural change communication (SBCC) is a key strategy to enhance the results of the country programme and emergency response. UNICEF Mexico worked with the Centre for Anthropological Research and Studies (CIESAS) in translating 22 risk communication messages into 42 indigenous languages encouraging hygiene practices, psychosocial support for managing emotions, prevention of malnutrition, prevention of domestic violence, and emotional support to ensure continuity of education. A total of 40 indigenous and community radio stations supported their dissemination across 15 states, reaching around 9.8 million people. To reach a wider audience, over 38 SBCC radio spots, videos, infographics and guidelines on the secondary effects of COVID-19 were disseminated. These materials were featured on the official website of the Government of Mexico. The radio spots reached an estimated 30 million listeners through airtime granted by ACIR and the Mexican Network of Educational TV and Radio. Radio dramas produced with the Mexican Association of Community Radios (AMARC) and La Voladora Radio on educational continuity reached around 2 million listeners.

The school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have added challenges to increasing the access to equitable and inclusive quality education and learning opportunities for children and adolescents in Mexico, in a context of a pre-existing learning crisis (in which around 80% of students in primary education achieved only minimum levels of competency in reading, writing and mathematics), significant number of out-of-school children and adolescents, as well as high rates of students at risk of drop-out. Contributing to SP Goal Area 2, CPD Outcome 2 and in line with UNSCDF Direct Effect 2 on the fulfilment of the right to education, SDG 4 on quality education as well as Axis 2 of the PND on access to education, UNICEF Mexico provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Education in its remote learning program *Aprende en Casa* (Learn at Home), based mainly on TV programs and internet content, reaching 8.2 million students in the country. To fully support MoE's efforts in continuing initial education during the pandemic, UNICEF Mexico delivered an online training to over 13,000 teachers on psychosocial support for children in their early years to prepare for the reopening of ECE services. The formulation, endorsement and implementation of the National Initial Education Policy was made possible with UNICEF Mexico's technical contribution through evidence generation and capacity building.

In terms of building skills for life and work, according to Output 2.3 of the CPD and in line with UNSCDF Direct 5 on decent work and employability and PND Axis 3 on employment and job creation, UNICEF Mexico advocated for the incorporation of fundamental, transferable and job-related skills with a life-cycle approach in the current process of curricular reform, which will impact approximately 25 million children in basic education. The development of skills for life and work is the current headline of the Generation Unlimited (Gen U) agenda in Mexico, strongly supported by the

Mexican Youth Institute, CEMEX and other UN agencies. Jointly with the MoE quality learning opportunities were developed at all educational levels and through alternative pathways for OOSC. UNICEF contributed to the revision of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) of the MoE providing evidence-based data on how to improve employability skills for adolescents. In line with SDG 5 on gender equality, UNICEF Mexico continued to foster adolescents' participation and empowerment, particularly girls, scaling up interventions on gender equality and non-formal skills training. Examples of this line of work include the design of an intervention to encourage adolescent girls' interest in the STEM fields to benefit at least 3,600 adolescent girls in 2021, as well as hosting a Youth Challenge that received 670 applications, with 134 youth and adolescents participating in the bootcamp and one team winning the Global Youth Challenge with a STEM project.

U-Report was instrumental in gauging the mental and psychosocial well-being of adolescents during the pandemic and expanded significantly during 2020. There was a 93.1% increase in U-Reporters with respect to 2019, reaching 104,000 adolescents and enabling their participation in issues that affect them, making UNICEF Mexico the Office with the highest number of U-Reporters in LAC. Eleven surveys were launched for topics like cyberbullying, the COVID-19 pandemic, gender-based violence, climate change, mental health and nutrition. Livechats reached 74,425 adolescents, while the chatbot about preventive measures against COVID-19 reached 20,000.

Protection of children and adolescents against violence in all its forms is a key priority in the new country programme. Contributing to SP Goal Area 3 and CPD Outcome 3, UNICEF Mexico's advocacy efforts, in collaboration with other UN agencies and the Executive Secretariat of the Comprehensive Child Protection System (SE-SIPINNA) with the Mexican Congress have led to the approval of the legal reform to prohibit corporal punishment and degrading treatment. This was an important step to discourage behaviours that promote the acceptance of violence in families and in communities. UNICEF redoubled its efforts on the prevention of violence at home. As part of the response to COVID-19 and given the increasing rate of violence brought about by the confinement, messages and videos on positive parenting, responsible use of the internet and a call to action for reporting violence were viewed 708,798 times on UNICEF's website and social networks. Radio spots on these issues were produced with a potential audience of 9.8 million people. To institute violence prevention at the community level, UNICEF Mexico, in partnership with ECHO, continued to support the initiative on violence-free communities in Guerrero and Chihuahua, where six safe spaces in three municipalities facilitated access to life skills, recreational and cultural activities, sports and school levelling activities for 291 children and adolescents, in line with SDG 16 on peace, justice and security, UNSDCF Direct Effect 8 on the prevention of all forms of violence against women and children, as well as Axis 1 of the NDP on respect for human rights. A Life Skills Framework for Adolescents was also developed with Education and ADAP sections within the Spotlight Initiative, whereby efforts to curb gender-based violence also include the development of social and behavioural change communication strategies for community mobilization.

Having integrated Business for Results (B4R) in child protection and contributing to the results of Spotlight, UNICEF brokered a public-private partnership (PPP) between the Government of Mexico and the hospitality sector, together with UNFPA, to expand the current capacity on safe shelters for women and their children, who are victims of violence. This PPP enabled various hotels in 13 cities to provide free accommodation and for 160 hotel staff and social workers to be trained on how to receive survivors of violence, identify their needs and initiate referral to appropriate service providers or government agencies. To date, 21 women and children have benefited from this partnership.

In line with UNSDCF Direct Effect 10 on access to justice, protection of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers and Axis 1 of the NDP on migration, UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, OHCHR and civil society organizations were successful after several years of advocating for reforms to the Migration Law and the Refugee, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum Law, which were finally approved in November 2020, reinforcing the principles of non-detention and protection for children and adolescents on the move, as well as best interest determination. To reinforce non-detention of migrant children and adolescents, UNICEF Mexico pushed for a more ambitious care reform in

Mexico and the National Foster Care Program was re-established in July 2020 in partnership with DIF. As part of the COVID-19 response, UNICEF Mexico and RELAF collaborated with local authorities in Mexico City to design SOPs to prevent new entries into residential care and to implement an “emergency foster care programme”. The temporary residential care facility in the Attorney General's Office (with an average population of 70 children) was closed and children were reunified with their families. The Centre for Transitory Stay of Children reduced its population from 67 to 27 children by promoting family reintegration whenever possible. The UNICEF-supported foster care program expanded in Chihuahua, engaging a total of 54 foster families, benefiting 74 children and adolescents.

Under SP Goal Area 4 and contributing to CPD Outcome 2, UNICEF Mexico worked with education authorities at federal and state levels to promote a safe school re-opening through *Salud en tus Manos* (Health in Your Hands). This is an initiative to build healthy and safe environments through proper handwashing, enabling the educational community to apply adequate health and hygiene measures to avoid the infection and propagation of COVID-19 during and in the aftermath of the pandemic, in line with SDG 3 on good health and well-being and SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation. An estimated 90,669 students will benefit from a targeted implementation in six priority states, including the installation of handwashing stations, supported by UNICEF's partnerships with ECHO, Metlife Foundation and Orbia. Educational manuals that promote positive behavioural changes towards menstrual hygiene management (MHM) are being piloted in 11 schools, with the aim to scale up their dissemination and use at the state level, as part of an advocacy strategy for MHM in schools developed with Essity and other partners.

To create an enabling environment for learning in schools, UNICEF Mexico provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Education and the Civil Protection Authority of Chiapas in integrating comprehensive school safety to 2,800 schools in the state. This was a product of a South-South exchange facilitated by UNICEF Mexico and UNICEF India in 2018, resulting in the State of Chiapas replicating the participative school safety model from Bihar, India.

UNICEF Mexico is leading the region with its new approaches in social protection under its CPD Outcome 4. In 2020, UNICEF focused its work on emphasizing the relevance of social protection as an effective response mechanism against the economic crisis generated by COVID19. A technical proposal was presented to the Mexico City Government on *Mi Beca para Empezar* (My Stipend to Start), a cash transfer program for children attending public education financed and implemented by the City Government, which benefits 1.2 million children. UNICEF Mexico recommended the provision of additional cash for beneficiaries to cover basic services during the pandemic, initially for two months. As a result, the City Government adopted the approach, resulting in a three-month vertical expansion (an increase in transfer values) of the program. This work contributed to the achievement of SP Goal Area 5, in line with SDGs 1 and 10 and in accordance with UNSCDF Direct Effect 1 on fulfilling the right to social protection and Axis 2 of the NDP on social policy. To further build the case for social protection during the pandemic, UNICEF Mexico partnered with the Universidad Iberoamericana-EQUIDE to carry out the survey *Encuesta de Seguimiento de los Efectos de la COVID-19 en hogares con niñas y niños* (ENCOVID19 Infancia), a bimonthly household telephone survey to follow up on the effects of COVID19 in households with children.

In terms of public finance for children, UNICEF Mexico published a budget analysis of the proposed Federal Government Expenditures Project for 2021. The study analysed budget allocations of the main programs and services for children and adolescents for the fiscal year and presented a series of recommendations to policy makers. The document was shared with government representatives and legislators from different commissions, including education, health, social welfare, children and adolescents, budget, human rights, among others.

Overall, despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on programme implementation, human and financial resources, UNICEF Mexico was able to achieve highly visible and solid results

that will support the Government of Mexico on the road to recovery in 2021 and beyond. This was possible because of UNICEF's adaptability and agile management of the situation presented by the changing country context, in addition to solid partnerships with government institutions at federal and state levels and by harnessing the financial and technical leadership of private sector partners.

## UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF established solid government partnerships with different directorates of the Ministry of Health, such as CNEGSR (Centro Nacional de Equidad de Género y Salud Reproductiva), CENCIA (Centro Nacional para la Salud de la Infancia y la Adolescencia), INSABI (Instituto de Salud para el Bienestar) and SNDIF (Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia) on IYCF and promotion of enabling environments for nutrition; with Ministry of Education at the state and federal levels on distance learning and school re-opening and innovation; with the Ministry of Interior and the Executive Secretary of the System for Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents (SE-SIPINNA) to advocate for essentiality of child protection services; with the National Institute of Migration (INM) and the National Commission for Refugees (COMAR) on the protection of migrant children; with the National Commission for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women (CEAV), the Institute of Social Development (INDESOL) on violence prevention and response; with the National Women's Institute, Council on Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination, SIPINNA and a movement called Dignified Menstruation Mexico on menstrual hygiene management, as well as with the National Youth Institute (IMJUVE) for the Generation Unlimited Initiative.

Partnerships with civil society organizations (especially APROLAM (Asociación Pro Lactancia Materna), ACCLAM (Asociación de Consultores Certificados en Lactancia Materna) and El Poder del Consumidor) and Academia (especially the National Institute of Public Health (INSP) and the Universidad Iberoamericana) were instrumental to generate evidence and advocate with the Government for improved national legislation and regulation to promote and protect breastfeeding; Latin American Network on Foster Care (RELAF), Juconi and the International Social Service (ISS) on alternative care; Teach4All on initial education; Mexican Red Cross and the National Autonomous University of Mexico on adolescent participation.

Partnerships with donors and supporters such as the Government of Netherlands, Novo Nordisk through the Danish Natcom, Liomont Laboratories, Beko, GIZ, AMEXCID, Banco Santander, Metlife Foundation, Orbia, Kimberly Clark, Colgate-Palmolive, ECHO, Posada Hotel Group, PRM, UNICEF USA and others were instrumental to ensure that UNICEF had the needed financial resources to support its actions in strengthening the work on nutrition, child protection, education, water sanitation and hygiene and adolescent development.

UNICEF collaborated with WHO/PAHO and FAO on improving national regulations to promote and protect breastfeeding; with UNESCO and WHO on safe school re-opening; with UNFPA, UNDP, ILO and UNIDO on Generation Unlimited; with UNHCR, IOM and OHCHR on migration; with UN Women, UNDP and UNFPA on the Spotlight Initiative, among others.

UNICEF also assumed a pivotal role in promoting UN coherence and collaboration by leading the inter-agency UNSDCF M&E group and, together with UNFPA, the OMT to develop the BOS for the UN in Mexico. Along the same lines, the UNICEF Representative assumed the Resident Coordinator function for two months.

## Lessons Learned and Innovations

Given this extraordinary year of the COVID-19 pandemic and considering its impact on the political, social and economic context of Mexico for the years to come, it is important to take into account the following lessons identified in 2020:

- In the face of complexity and ambiguity of the pandemic, it was necessary to create different scenarios on how programming, operations, communication and fundraising should adapt to the context, in order to stay relevant in the country, rather than just sticking to the plan. The scenario-building gave a sense of direction to the staff, helping manage anxiety related to the uncertainty of COVID-19. It has also provided an impulse for the office to start generating savings to ensure business continuity, in case fundraising (which generates 90% of office funds) would be severely impacted by the economic crisis brought about by the pandemic.
- In 2020 the Ministry of Health focused all its efforts in the emergency response to COVID-19. Previously agreed priorities, such as strengthening nutrition services in the health system, faded in the background. However, nutrition acquired new importance in the national agenda due to the evidence relating malnutrition (especially overweight and obesity) to increased susceptibility to the new coronavirus. The ability of UNICEF Mexico to adapt its approach to new and emerging Government priorities, without losing focus on its country programme targets, was a key lesson learned.
- In order to push for politically sensitive policy changes, such as the harmonization of the General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents with the Migration Law, it was important for UNICEF to position itself together with other UN agencies, primarily, UNHCR, IOM and OHCHR. It resulted in a stronger and united stance of the UN on the matter, helping with the approval of non-detention, best interest determination and special protection measures for migrant children and adolescents.
- To reach students excluded by the mainstream distance education programme, UNICEF proposed several innovative ideas for no-tech or low-tech solutions, including the use of the Internet of Good Things, RapidPro SMS messaging, call centres for educational support, amongst others. However, slow decision-making processes and overwhelmed capacities at the federal MoE paralyzed their actual implementation. By the end of 2020, only the SMS messaging for parents in support of the educational continuity of their children was functioning, reaching only 20,000 parents. In the future, it is recommended to approach state authorities rather than federal ones, when it comes to piloting innovative ideas, given that their decision-making process is shorter and contact with school communities is closer.
- Over the past years, UNICEF Mexico has developed several pilot projects, some of which were not scalable, despite their positive results. As a lesson learned, before starting a pilot, it is important to clarify its policy pathway and consider requirements for its scalability, such as evaluations and costing exercises. It is also paramount to link pilot interventions directly with existing Government programmes or plans, to ensure co-ownership, and in some cases co-financing, to promote their sustainability in the long-term.

### **INNOVATION**

- UNICEF Mexico innovated with a new way to perform end-user monitoring remotely that is cost-efficient and without requirement of new technologies. PFP, M&E and the Nutrition teams collaborated on monitoring the appropriate delivery of 37,000 food baskets, reaching 65,000 children in five states and learn about the opinions the beneficiaries had on the content of the baskets, by using the PFP call centre. Results showed that 18% of families who received the assistance declared that they did not have anything else to eat the day they received the donation, while 40% declared that they did not have enough to eat in general. One third of the interviewees who declared having received a leaflet with information on healthy diets, also declared that they did not remember even one key message contained in the leaflet.
- While distance learning is mostly defined by access to internet and other information and

communication technologies, the pandemic served as a lesson to re-learn the use of solutions from the past to solve existing problems. For example, in some remote villages in Chiapas, neither internet-based nor television-based remote learning schemes would work as neither the internet nor television signal reach them. In this case, the support to learning during the pandemic would have been more effective with the distribution of “old school” solutions like a photocopier or paper-based material. This would have been faster, more accessible and cost-efficient than investing in sophisticated learning platforms.