

Azerbaijan

Update on the context and situation of children

2020 represented the final year of the current UNICEF Country Programme in Azerbaijan and a year when the global COVID-19 pandemic and the escalation of the conflict in and beyond the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan had a substantive impact on the wellbeing of children and young people, and on the capacity of UNICEF and partners to implement planned programmes.

Since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020, Azerbaijan reported over 216,000 cases of coronavirus by end December, with 2,575 deaths. One in ten cases were reported amongst children and, beyond immediate epidemiology, the pandemic impacted the broader wellbeing and development of children and youth nationwide – schools closed for most of the year, with classes moved to online and broadcast formats, scope for recreational and play activities was reduced due to prolonged periods of quarantine, and the economic impact of COVID-19 affected livelihoods and household finances. Initial findings from a socioeconomic impact assessment of the pandemic, involving UNICEF, found that for example, while routine vaccination services were not suspended it is expected that coverage will be lower in 2020 than normal, paediatric home visiting was suspended, creating concerns for care of healthy new-borns and the timely identification of sick babies, many small and medium enterprises closed leaving employees unpaid, the price of staple foods increased by nearly 6 per cent in May, 1.9 million children were affected by school closures with almost one-third believed to have had challenges in accessing remote learning alternatives. These findings were echoed by the results of regular audience telephone surveys undertaken by UNICEF which consistently showed that many families faced increased financial pressure – data between April and July 2020, for example, found that 45 per cent of families with children reported that their income had significantly decreased, and 41 per cent reported spending less on household needs, which could be a predictor for child deprivation. The psychological impact of the pandemic on children and parents also became apparent with UNICEF finding that by mid-summer around 41 per cent of survey respondents reported feeling depressed or hopeless. A UNFPA/UN Women Study also found that about 8 per cent of domestic violence that occurred during the pandemic was towards children, while amongst more than 900 calls received by the Azerbaijan Child Helpline between May and November, 1 in 10 was seeking psychological support related to violence against children.

The Government responded quickly to the growing impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable households, including through enhanced social assistance payments combined with expansion of training and job creation schemes and private sector salary support, guarantees that expenses associated with COVID-19 treatment would be covered by State funds, and rapid establishment of virtual learning platforms. By the mid-year, the Government had reported to have provided social assistance to almost half the population through employment and social welfare programmes including job protection for 1.67 million people, targeted social assistance for 320,000 people, a one-time welfare payment for 600,000 people, and food assistance for 100,000 families.

The full impact of COVID-19 on children and families is still to be determined, – although data from the Government's State Statistical Committee already shows a near 5 per cent fall in GDP from 2019-2020 and limited recovery expected in 2021, which would indicate that the coming year will remain challenging for many vulnerable families.

In late September 2020, an escalation of the conflict in and beyond the Nagorno-Karabakh region had an additional impact on the situation of children. Twelve children were killed in districts on the Azerbaijan side of the former "Line of Contact" as a direct result of attacks. An estimated 112,000 people, based on UN calculations, were left in need of assistance and, even after fighting ceased,

children remained at risk from high levels of unexploded ordnance and affected by psychological stress and disruption to health services. At least 50 schools were destroyed or seriously damaged. Displacement and interruption to basic services exacerbated vulnerabilities created by the COVID-19 pandemic and required a flexible refocusing of assistance from Government and other partners including UNICEF. At the same time, the return of territory to Azerbaijani control after the 9 November Statement, signed between Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Russian Federation which brought about a cessation to the latest hostilities, creates opportunities for targeted investment in child and youth-focused programmes in these districts in the future, ahead of returns of previously displaced populations.

Despite this crisis context, other key developments in support of child rights also occurred. A National Children's Strategy was endorsed by the President of Azerbaijan in July 2020, followed by approval of a related Child Action Plan, which together place child rights and investment in child development at the heart of the national development agenda. The establishment of new Social Services Agency under the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population represented a significant milestone in reforms of social protection system and the formalization of a social services workforce. The Government's participation in the Regional Conference on Children's Access to Justice, held in Bosnia Herzegovina in February, resulted in Azerbaijan signing a pledge reaffirming its commitment to reforms in the justice system to better protect child rights. Azerbaijan's combined fifth and sixth Periodic Reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child were officially published in November, ahead of the formal review by the Committee in February 2021.

Due to operational constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the new UNICEF Country Programme Document 2021-2025 was deferred for approval to the UNICEF Executive Board in February 2021. This allowed additional time for finalisation of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and ensuring that the planned outcomes of the Country Programme Document fully supported both the Sustainable Development Framework and the broader national development plan. The long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the geopolitical implications resulting from the escalation of the conflict in and beyond the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan on UNICEF's programmatic vision will be accommodated through routine review and adjustments to the Country Programme after it comes into effect

Major contributions and drivers of results

In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF immediately focused on risk communication to alert families to the causes of transmission and methods of prevention. Multimedia assets, printed materials and communication campaigns were disseminated through digital platforms, television and community engagement, reaching over 4 million people. The average number of impressions for COVID-19 posts was 60,800 on the main Country Office social media platform, while the number of unique visitors interacting with COVID-19 pages on the UNICEF Azerbaijan website was more than 153,800. Working closely with media agencies, health experts and young people themselves, a creative and varied approach to content was adopted to secure continued audience engagement during a nine-month period. Social media content ranged from basic hygiene and prevention measures to activities for parents and children to promote early childhood development at home, stories from celebrities on their experiences of caring for children during quarantine, practical activities for young people to stay healthy at home, and psychological support to children and adolescents during the prolonged isolation from friends and relatives.

Capacity building of key maternal and child health professionals on COVID-19 infection prevention and case management reached over 900 healthcare workers, while the development of a district level training initiative focused on local health facilities and their staff – PROACT – was designed to increase readiness to respond to future outbreaks, covering 12 districts and targeting 2,000 local health

workers by May 2021. Technical support and guidance were also provided to government partners engaging with the global COVAX facility to ensure readiness for future COVID-19 vaccine procurement and delivery.

While a planned home visiting programme in support of UNICEF's early childhood development initiative was constrained due to limits on physical movement within communities, the Country Office rapidly adapted key elements of the initiative to allow for remote support to families, establishing digital platforms on social media and providing regular online early childhood development counselling sessions, online packages of COVID-19 prevention information and practical advice for parents on supporting early childhood development in the home during the quarantine periods. Through these adaptations, more than 16,000 parents were able to participate in online nutrition sessions and over 210,000 people received practical information through the digital platforms, ensuring that the focus on early childhood development – which is an increasingly important aspect of national development strategies – was not overlooked during the pandemic.

In response to the escalation of the conflict in and beyond the Nagorno-Karabakh region, UNICEF worked with health authorities to strengthen maternal and child health services in affected communities, through the establishment of 15 Baby-Friendly Rooms that provided early childhood development activities, nutrition counselling and care for pregnant women and new mothers, and health examinations for young children. This initiative strengthened the focus on the importance of community-based maternal and child health services, beyond the immediate needs created by the conflict escalation.

The public health crisis of COVID-19 in Azerbaijan created an opportunity for maximising collaboration and cooperation between UNICEF and multiple health agencies, including the Ministry of Health, the State Agency for Mandatory Health Insurance, the Management Union of Medical Territorial Units and the Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency, in a context of broader health sector reform. This collaboration was instrumental in ensuring that a wide range of child and maternal health issues, beyond infection prevention, could be built into the overall health and nutrition sector response to the pandemic.

One target for UNICEF's regular programme in 2020 was a pilot initiative on integrated social work, developed in three districts, to be fully embraced by the Government. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the escalation of the conflict in and beyond the Nagorno-Karabakh region, underlined the importance of regular contact between social workers and vulnerable families at the community level, and the initiative utilised a combination of physical and online outreach approaches in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to regularly support 1,275 children and families, including providing advice on available social assistance, monitoring for signs of stress and potential violence in the home, and connecting families with other services as needed. Similarly, during the escalation of the conflict, social workers employed through the pilot initiative supported families with access to shelter, food and non-food support as well as psychosocial counselling. During the year, acknowledging the impact of the pilot experience, a final draft Social Services Strategy was submitted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population to the Cabinet of Ministers, and a new Social Services Agency was established within the Ministry – itself a significant milestone for reform of the social protection system and formalization of the social service workforce in the country.

Despite the required closure of schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, coverage of one-year preschool education increased from 85 per cent in 2019 to 87 per cent in 2020 while the preschool enrolment rate for children aged 1-5 years increased from 28.5 per cent in 2019 to 31.3 per cent (48 per cent girls) in 2020, benefiting from transitions to online learning opportunities and underlining the Government's strong commitment to early learning. A UNICEF-supported evaluation of the School Readiness Programme for 5-year olds, completed in 2020, found that the Programme had been instrumental in establishing preschool education as a national priority, acknowledging the leadership

and commitment of the Ministry of Education and support of UNICEF, including the piloting of innovative models for school readiness, solid analytical work, knowledge brokering and evidence generation. For its part, UNICEF continued to support a model of community-based early learning centres in the first months of the year, which expanded from 320 to 500 centres during the year (95 per cent in rural areas), and through adapting the Centres' work to online outreach reached 9,208 children aged 3-4 years. During the prolonged quarantine periods from March, nearly 160,000 preschool age children and over 100,000 parents benefitted from home-based early learning guidance and parenting education resources developed with UNICEF support and delivered through television and digital platforms, including through a parenting education portal and cell phone application established in partnership with the Ministry of Education.

Despite the practical challenges faced by many families in providing childcare at home during the pandemic, the quarantine period served to underline the importance of parents having regular access to quality early learning and development support and this has created a strong foundation for further investment in parenting support for the future.

With schools being closed for most of the year, UNICEF focused its support to the Ministry of Education on distance education through the provision of global guidance on remote learning and development of local guidelines on quality distance education. Technical support from UNICEF enabled the Ministry to develop a roadmap for future school reopening – recognising that there will be an inevitable impact of the interrupted academic year on learning outcomes, emphasis was placed on combining face-to-face and online learning, enhancing student learning through blended instruction, implementing learning assessments and providing guidelines on supporting individual learning pathways for students. Support was also provided to prepare for school-based psychosocial assistance for children ahead of a possible return to classes in 2021.

Despite the challenges of expanding inclusive education for children with disabilities while schools remained closed, UNICEF supported implementation of the State Programme on Inclusive Education, with a teacher training programme introduced to the formal curriculum of national pre- and in-service teacher training and over 10,000 primary school teachers (99 per cent women), 320 university teachers and 1,300 students of pedagogical universities trained in inclusive education approaches.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity to strengthen the participation of young people in development of programming, beyond being beneficiaries of services. Through a partnership with the Azerbaijan Youth Foundation, the Azerbaijan Red Crescent Society and others, young people were actively engaged in the design, development and dissemination of COVID-19 prevention messages relevant to youth audiences and adapted for digital platforms. Through this initiative, youth-focused information messaging and guidance reached more than 682,000 people during the year. Young people, almost half being girls from low-income families, were actively engaged in community outreach, where safe and feasible, to identify and support vulnerable families at risk, through partnerships with the ASAN Volunteers organization and the NGO Regional Development Public Union. Girls also contributed to the design of hygiene kits in the COVID-19 response, to make them more gender-appropriate.

Investments in the national network of Youth Houses and Career Development Centres continued, in partnership between UNICEF, the Ministry of Youth and Sport and the Azerbaijan Youth Foundation, with 25 youth workers - half women - gaining skills in mentoring, art therapy, project management, career counselling, entrepreneurship, website development, and public relations. Direct engagement by the Youth Houses and Career Development Centres with young people moved to digital platforms with nearly 8,000 young people, almost half being girls, supported with psychological and legal counselling, work readiness, social entrepreneurship support, guidance on project design, volunteerism and Basic Life Skills.

Scaling up of the Basic Life Skills initiative has been identified as a key priority for UNICEF in 2020 prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and UNICEF adapted the Basic Life Skills curriculum to an online format to ensure young people could continue accessing the programme during the quarantine periods. More than 5,000 people, including adolescents, their family members and teachers, were reached via these online platforms and an assessment of the initiative found that more than three-quarters of participants (77 per cent) had learned new skills and concepts and a similar number (74 per cent) had tried to use the strategies shared through the programme in their own lives and with their families. During the year, a toolbox comprising a set of resources for programme coordinators, facilitators, parents and youth to collaborate via interactive video platforms was developed, and an agreement was reached with the Ministry of Education to introduce the package into the vocational training colleges and secondary schools in areas affected by the escalation of the conflict in and beyond the Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2021.

Azerbaijan's experience in developing a flexible Basic Life Skills programme attracted interest from elsewhere in the region, with six interactive webinars delivered to a joint group of adolescents from Kazakhstan, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia.

The travel restrictions created by the COVID-19 pandemic did not prevent the further development of the Master's degree programme for youth work managers, established in 2019 between UNICEF, the Academy of Public Administration under the President of Azerbaijan and Tallinn State University in Estonia. A series of exchange lectures on Strategic Management, Information Technologies and Innovative Management in Youth Policy was conducted at the end of the year and will continue into 2021, with recorded versions made available for students of six universities and active youth sector managers to improve knowledge in the area of youth policy and innovative management.

Direct monitoring of the situation of child rights was especially challenging as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic – for example, the number of childcare institutions monitored by the National Preventive Group of the Office of the Azerbaijan Ombudsperson in 2020 fell by 50 per cent compared to 2019. However, during the year UNICEF supported the establishment of a Call Centre within the Office of the Ombudsperson, with advanced technologies to better record calls, track responses and provide data on the calls themselves. UNICEF also supported the provision of a professional social worker and a lawyer to the Office of the Ombudsperson's, who have joined monitoring visits to child facilities by the National Preventive Group and supported the child-friendliness of the new Call Centre.

UNICEF also adopted new approaches to effectively monitor the impact of COVID-19 on families. Two sets of regular bi-weekly telephone surveys, reaching 6,500 people (half being women), assessed household knowledge, attitudes and behaviours including prevalence of violence, in response to the pandemic and its impact on the economic, health, nutrition, education and child protection situation of families and children. In addition, two comprehensive surveys engaging 2,000 respondents were conducted jointly with the Public Health Reform Centre of the Ministry of Health and WHO to gain deeper understanding of knowledge and behaviours related to COVID-19, including the perception and readiness for vaccination. The findings and recommendations of all these surveyed were shared with the State Agency for Mandatory Health Insurance, the Ministry of Health, as well as UN agencies and international partners on a regular basis to support decision-making, programming, planning and monitoring.

An innovative approach to monitoring was developed through a social listening dashboard to assess and analyse online discussions around COVID-19 and the quarantine measures. Around 20,000 social media posts were reviewed each week, focusing on fake-news and rumours, myths, reactions to official recommendations, individual responses to restrictions, and the impact of the pandemic on the welfare of people and families. More than 30 weekly reports were generated using the social listening dashboard and shared with Government and other partners.

UNICEF also supported multi-sector needs assessments including leading the social sector analysis within a joint UN Social Economic Assessment on COVID-19 which contributed to the identification of the most vulnerable population groups to support government planning. Following the escalation of the conflict in and beyond the Nagorno-Karabakh region, UNICEF reviewed, adapted and translated the Multi Cluster/Sector Initial Rapid Assessment questionnaire and shared with Government partners to support a rapid assessment, in which UNICEF also participated, in affected districts.

In line with its humanitarian mandate, UNICEF responded to the needs of children and families affected by the escalation of the conflict that took place between late September and early November 2020. In full collaboration with Government partners, UNICEF provided a wide range of assistance that included provision of food packages for 2,100 vulnerable families whose houses were destroyed or damaged, families with children and adults with disabilities and low-income families with more than two children, as well as 1,300 family kits containing basic household supplies, and 1,000 hygiene kits, together covering a population of more than 11,000 people. In partnership with the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action, risk-reduction materials and community-based briefings related to unexploded ordnance reached more than 87,000 people – half of them children – while a collaboration with the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs enabled a rapid upgrading of skills for psychologists and mental health experts resulting in psychological assessments and counselling being provided to more than 1,000 children affected by the conflict. Work also began with the Ministry of Education on training school psychologists and teachers on mental health and psychosocial support, alongside an assessment of the impact of the conflict on the education sector, in advance of a possible return to school in 2021.

In a three-month period, UNICEF was able to secure an additional US\$ 910,000 in financial support for its humanitarian response to the conflict escalation, while US\$ 1.7 million in additional funding was mobilized during the year in support of the COVID-19 response – the support of UNICEF's Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia and the well-established relationship between the Country Office and local donor representatives were instrumental in securing these additional resources

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

The COVID-19 pandemic required the Country Office to engage in a wide-range of partnerships to facilitate effective implementation of programmes in a constrained operational context. This included maximising outreach potential of non-government and civil society partners, complementing traditional working arrangements with State entities.

Of particular importance was the flexibility of the partnership between the Country Office and the European Union, which allowed for a refocusing of regular multi-sector EU-funded initiatives to support emerging needs within the context of the pandemic. Planned activities and results could be maintained even amidst the constraints created by COVID-19, and the engagement of NGO partners through the EU-funded initiative could be continued. A new relationship with USAID allowed for vital risk communication initiatives to be quickly implemented, and expanded into health sector capacity strengthening, using the pandemic as a framework for investment in longer-term system strengthening. A new agreement with the United Kingdom government enabled psychosocial support to be provided through the education system, an important precursor to a focus on mental health in schools within the next UNICEF Country Programme.

At the district level, solid engagement with Executive Committees – local governance structures – proved critical in facilitating access to vulnerable communities and placing child rights at the centre of local government support.

UNICEF's multi-faceted partnership approach, built over previous years, enabled closer coordination between multiple agencies working on the COVID-19 response, notably in the health sector. Through close technical and strategic engagement with the World Health Organization, the Ministry of Health and TABIB – the government health agency under the State Agency for Mandatory Health Insurance – UNICEF provided support to public communication strategy and implementation, vaccine procurement and health worker training without the risk of duplication or inefficiencies.

By working quickly with the newly established Social Services Agency, under long-term partner the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population, UNICEF was able to strengthen the social services elements of the pandemic response, and support urgent welfare needs during the conflict escalation. This approach forged important linkages between 'emergency' responses and core service provision – for example through social worker and case management support to vulnerable families, psychosocial assessment and counselling, prevention of violence and monitoring of the situation of high-risk groups including children with disabilities.

Within the United Nations system, UNICEF played a lead role in supporting COVID-19 related public communication and led the coordination of the social sector in the joint UN socioeconomic assessment of the impact of the pandemic. Similarly, UNICEF worked closely with the UN Resident Coordinator's Office and sister UN agencies in rapid assessments of the impact of the escalation of conflict in and beyond the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Given the constantly evolving situation within the country throughout the year, UNICEF strived to develop partnership arrangements that would enable maximum flexibility of approaches; in addition to service contracts and programme agreements, UNICEF also entered into several Memorandums of Understanding with non-government entities, that allowed for a broad focus and range of implementation modalities, to accommodate emerging needs

Lessons Learned and Innovations

The unprecedented disruption to, and constraints upon, delivery of regular programmes that

characterised the greater part of the year required a dramatic refocusing of UNICEF's approaches in management, operations, programme delivery and monitoring.

The transition to full-time teleworking for all staff and consultants from March 2020 saw the Country Office utilise information technologies to support remote operations, including establishment of "mini-offices" for key staff with basic equipment to facilitate day to day administrative tasks. While electronic systems were used wherever possible, for example for routine signatories and bank processing, the global trend for electronic payments systems and administration did not always reflect local regulations and processes, requiring a flexible approach at the country level. Prolonged periods of quarantine combined with closure of schools and day-care facilities required a more flexible approach to staff working arrangements, with the Country Office introducing a weekly "housekeeping day" free of formal meetings, engagements or internal deadlines to allow staff to balance better their work tasks and household obligations. The office took full advantage of the technical support provided by specialists in the UNICEF Regional Office to enable staff to access professional guidance beyond the immediate team, and benefited from advice and one-to-one support from the Regional Staff Counsellor to mitigate pressures faced by colleagues during a nine-month period of isolated working.

Programme delivery was enhanced by new approaches to delivery, notably through the use of online platforms to, for example, connect social workers and vulnerable families, provide positive parenting and early childhood development initiatives for families at home, design and deliver remote basic and early learning programming, maintain life skills and related training opportunities for young people and accelerate vital public health information and communication. While the move of many programme activities to a virtual format ensured that most planned activities could be continued throughout the year, the digital divide experienced by many families – especially those in lower income groups – was highlighted and remains an issue that requires concerted focus if online programming is to become more commonplace in the future. While virtual programme delivery did enable many services and initiatives reach more people in some sectors, the challenges of equitable access and quality of programme content remain to be fully measured.

The constraints created by the COVID-19 pandemic on face-to-face contacts with families and communities, with travel restrictions in place for most of the year, encouraged more use of digital approaches to collect data and evidence in support of programme design and adaptation. In particular, the timely establishment of audience telephone surveying in response to the pandemic enabled the Country Office to gather a wide range of up to date information on household perceptions and practices that was used not only for UNICEF's own programming but was shared systematically with government and other partners to inform wider decision making. For the first time, UNICEF also introduced regular social media listening systems, which generated real-time insights to common and emerging issues being discussed across a broad public audience and created better opportunities to identify trends, pinpoint possible misinformation and gaps in knowledge related to COVID-19.

With limited physical access to communities, the Country Office also adapted its traditional direct field monitoring for quality assurance to a remote footing. Increased use was made of regular contacts with implementing partners through telephone calls and messaging groups, alongside regular "human interest" reporting that confirmed implementation status and impact on beneficiaries.

The investments made in previous years in emergency preparedness and response capacities within both the Country Office and several partners demonstrated its value, notably following the escalation of the conflict in and beyond the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the last quarter of the year. UNICEF was able to engage quickly with key partners to agree priority areas of intervention, especially in the areas of psychosocial support and mine risk education and begin implementation of responses in a relatively short timeframe. The response to both the conflict escalation and the COVID-19 pandemic did identify remaining gaps in the supply sector, with shortages in available stocks of basic humanitarian supplies within the local market. The experience of supply management during the year

also highlighted the importance of a strong working relationship between the Country Office supply and administration team and the national customs authorities to facilitate rapid import of essential supplies.

The overarching lesson learned from the challenging experience of programming in 2020 was the importance of flexible implementation approaches, and the supportive engagement of partners in enabling regular programming to be maintained through an emergency context. In many cases, UNICEF was able to continue delivering routine programming – for example skills training for young people, early childhood development, nutrition counselling for mothers and social worker support for vulnerable families – by utilising online and other remote structures and adapting programme content to the prevailing context. The willingness of donor and implementing partners to support the change in modalities ensured that overall progress against programme targets could be maintained, despite the constraints, and the approach represented an important step towards blending development and emergency programming – this will be significant as the country moves back towards a more regular developmental environment in the next year. The role of civil society took on growing importance in community-focused programming, with UNICEF increasing the number of its non-government partners by over 55 per cent compared to 2019.

The opportunity created by the COVID-19 pandemic to invest in strengthening of professional capacities in notably the health and education sectors will also contribute to longer term system reforms and enhancements. Similarly, the experience of transitioning some programming implementation to more online formats, combined with the inevitable increase in digital literacy amongst the general population resulting from the quarantine periods, will create new opportunities to expand outreach to key audiences in some programme areas longer-term, although the issue of accessibility and affordability of digital connections for lower-income households will remain a challenge to be addressed