The global COVID-19 pandemic combined with the political unrest that followed the August presidential elections critically influenced the country’s overall socio-economic situation and children’s well-being in particular.

With an already sluggish economy, Belarus experienced a 1.7% economic contraction over the first half of 2020 and a 19% nominal depreciation of the Belarusian ruble from January to November 2020. The World Bank (WB) forecasts a deepening economic recession with an estimated 2.8% contraction in 2021. Deteriorating socio-economic conditions increase vulnerabilities for children, who traditionally have been disproportionately affected by poverty. In May 2020, a UNICEF/WB online survey revealed that 26.5% of children were exposed to the risk of multiple deprivations in their rights compared to the pre-COVID rate of 12.6%.

The announcement of election results was followed by protests, resulting in detentions of large numbers of people, including some minors. Statements from the UN Secretary General and other UN officials called for peaceful assembly to be allowed and refrainment of excessive force. Authorities expressed the view that children should not participate in protests, suggesting that families whose children were found in protests could be qualified as being in ‘socially dangerous conditions’.

In combination with COVID-19 related stress, these environments enhance the potential for risks to children’s and adolescents’ mental health. A 2019 UNICEF study showed that approximately 18.2 per cent of adolescents (15 to 19 years old) have symptoms of depression, and of them 26.1 per cent had suicidal thoughts. This study showed that adolescent girls were 1.6 times more likely than boys to have depressive thoughts. These depressive and suicidal thoughts correlated with strained relations with fathers, physical and psychological violence, alcohol consumption, situational anxiety and absence of life goals. Lack of knowledge about risk factors was further found to be compounded by a lack of skills to manage stress or deal with social pressure.

Challenges of children’s and adolescents’ capacities for social-emotional skills were revealed in a 2020 assessment by UNICEF with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Republican Institute for Vocational Training that examined capacities of schools’ curricula to provide students with 21st century skills. Curricula analysis showed that the least represented competencies in the basic education curriculum are resilience, courage, curiosity and leadership. Accompanying PISA data analysis
demonstrated that the level of self-efficacy was significantly below the OECD average. Key challenges limiting schools’ abilities to support such skills were identified by the assessment, including lack of comprehensive and coherent action plans; insufficient budgets dedicated for the development of 21st century skills; and lack of flexibility to amend policy documents to reflect the demands of the labour market.

A UNFPA COVID-19 survey showed that the pandemic increased pressure on women in terms of domestic responsibilities, leading to spikes in mothers’ depression. Even prior to these developing events, data suggested that many parents did not understand how their lifestyles affected their children. In every third home with children, one or more person smoked indoors and only 14 per cent of fathers habitually read to their children. Furthermore, fathers expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of time they played with their children, suggesting readiness towards more equal parenting roles. (UNICEF ECD KAP, 2019)

While Belarus has achieved universal coverage with pre-school and secondary school education for children 2-17, a 2018 disability survey revealed that only 18.5% (27.1 % girls, 14% boys) of children with functional difficulties attend regular pre-schools and secondary schools. COVID-19 further complicated access to school for many, where over spring 2020 approximately 40% of school children remained at home (UNICEF/WB Rapid Survey). No systematic approach on distant learning was put in place.

While no national lockdown or school closings were imposed, many people took initiative and reduced their social contacts to prevent infection. Technology served as a key channel for communication and connection with families, friends and communities for many children, but not all, deepening the digital divide where children from larger families, low-income families, and children with disabilities were reported to have more limited access to technology. The shift to online activities and services not only left some children deprived from access, it also highlighted the greater need for digital literacy of parents and professionals working with children and adolescents. Cyber safety remains another concern for many parents, and in a UNICEF/WB rapid assessment of parents’ attitudes towards children Internet use, 65% expressed belief that their children don’t do anything useful on the Internet.

Although some hospitals were reprofiled for COVID-19, primary health services remained functional. Yet, the changing circumstances did deter some families from bringing children for fear of infection with reductions in use of services. The Ministry of Health is exploring opportunities for developing e-counseling services to expand access.
In 2020, the Government developed its new five-year state programmes, with three providing strategic directions on child rights issues. Parliament also passed the Law on Rights of People with Disabilities and their Social Inclusion, guaranteeing lifetime, quality and inclusive education to all people and children with disabilities. The MOE established guidelines on pedagogical-medical commissions for methodological support to facilitate schools’ inclusion process, as well as led approval of the 2020-2023 Plan for Inter-departmental Measures for the comprehensive de-institutionalization of children and youth. To mitigate COVID-19, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection also expanded its cash transfer programme targeted on social assistance for families with many children.

At the same time, Belarus participated in several international committee reviews including the CRC and the UPR. The Committee on the Rights of the Child called for particular attention to issues of violence, strengthening family environments, children with disabilities, administration of child-friendly justice, financing for children as well as other areas.

**Major contributions and drivers of results**

To close the equity gaps among children and establish protective and inclusive environments, UNICEF programming addressed cross-cutting issues such as disability, violence, justice and mental health. Programme interventions directly contributed to the 2030 SDG Agenda and UNICEF’s five Strategic Plan Goals.

Two key challenges required the country office (CO) to adapt quickly, changing both internal management and external communication. With strong advocacy, crisis communication and transferring to online work, UNICEF gained additional support from private sector and managed to deliver necessary supplies, capacity development and services to end-users.

The COVID-19 crisis affected children and families in Belarus, as well as the UNICEF Office, and was later exacerbated by the political unrest following the August elections. These conditions required the CO to keep political neutrality while upholding human rights principles and finding ways to keep delivering for children. The CO made careful shifts of planned activities, especially in terms of public events, mass gatherings, face-to-face meetings and high-level advocacy.

**Goal 1: Every Child Survives and Thrives**

*Rapid Medical Responses for Infection Prevention & Control (IPC):*

In 2020, the CO redirected activities and resources to deliver immediate IPC interventions in the
healthcare and education systems. These activities were planned and implemented within UNICEF’s Global COVID-19 Humanitarian Action for Children.

The office applied a system strengthening approach to enhance frontline healthcare workers’ knowledge and skills in responding to COVID. Particular attention was paid to frontline workers from reprofiled facilities. With key medical academies and facilities, 2302 professionals gained knowledge about diagnosis approaches, treatment and prophylactics of COVID-19. Expanding training and information online, the CO reached over 16,000 healthcare providers. Applying ‘south-south’ collaboration, developed training webinars were conducted among 180 medical professionals from 10 countries, enhancing their knowledge on how to properly use oxygen concentrators for respiratory support.

To address IPC in educational establishments, the CO cooperated with the Republican Centre of Hygiene, Epidemiology and Public Health in webinars for 693 health and education specialists (92.8 % females; 7.2% males) who gained skills on how to implement COVID-19 prevention outreach to children in education facilities, reaching approximately 30,000 children and adolescents on safe behaviour skills.

**Strengthening Mental Health Outreach:**
Children’s and adolescents’ mental health has been a growing issue, yet the 2020 developments increased mental health risks and widened the number of those facing these risks.

The CO supported emergency psychological assistance for frontline healthcare providers, education specialists, parents, children and adolescents. Approximately 1016 psychologists and healthcare professionals gained skills on how to provide psychological assistance to COVID-19 frontline workers. Online webinars for 520 teachers and institution employees provided practical tips for stress resilience and burn-out prevention. Individual psychological consultations were provided for healthcare workers and pedagogues of residential care institutions for children, with over 1500 people receiving individual consultations and distance relaxation and psycho-therapeutic techniques.

**System Strengthening of ECI Services At-Scale:**
While significant reprogramming occurred to respond quickly to COVID-19, the CO continued to scale up key programming interventions such as early childhood intervention (ECI) services. Partnering with the Ministry of Health (MOH), healthcare agencies and CSOs, 40 ECI inter-district centres were established, providing access of the service to all regions. System strengthening interventions included implementation of a mandatory ECI course for all centre personnel, enhancing their skills on ECI service provision and early identification of developmental delays using universal scales and screening tools provided by UNICEF.
Complementing development of the ECI service, the national system of early complex assistance to children U3 was strengthened with a MOH and MOE joint order on cross-sectoral collaboration. Additionally, 80 ECI and education specialists were trained on cross-sectoral collaboration, with a referral mechanism for pre-mature babies piloted in Brest region. A national parenting programme for pre-mature babies was established in maternity hospitals across Belarus’ six regions and capital city, with over 1,200 mothers receiving offline and online psychological counselling as well as informational and legal support.

**Goal 2: Every Child Learns**

*Enhancing Inclusive Education Approaches:*

While Belarus has reached universal coverage of education for boys and girls, the country has not met the SDG standards for education where all children learn in their community schools. Inclusive education is a critical strategy for social inclusion of vulnerable children, especially children with disabilities.

The CO continued to partner with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and key stakeholders to strengthen system responses and bring programming at-scale, applying a life-long learning approach where children, from early childhood through adolescence and adulthood, receive education accommodations to maximize their learning potentials.

Recognizing the multi-disciplinary nature of the early complex assistance service, the CO facilitated international expertise to review pre-schools’ early complex assistance curriculum with recommendations piloted in 14 pre-schools. School focal points were trained on new approaches in early learning and learning through play. With the Belarusian State Pedagogical University, a national ECD and early learning resource centre was established to provide methodological support to specialists and to adapt new innovative approaches on delivering quality early education and early learning to young children. These interventions enable children with special learning needs and developmental delays to receive additional support in their local pre-schools rather than in separate specialized facilities.

At the same time, UNICEF partnered with key stakeholders to support development of a national inclusive education work plan, defining key steps to ensure sustainable and inclusive changes in education policy and methodological framework.
In partnership with the Institution of Inclusive Education and international experts, the CO established new guidelines on pedagogical-medical commissions approved by the MOE. These guidelines justify the need for a “special education coordinator” in each inclusive school and pre-school to facilitate inclusion processes and organizational functions for quality inclusion of children with disabilities and special educational needs in classrooms and school life in general.

While pre-schools and schools remained open throughout the pandemic in 2020, prevention initiatives still mandated for new teaching and remote learning approaches. The CO is collaborating with the Academy of Post-Graduate Education to design teacher training modules that advance skills in inclusive practices including distance learning approaches that can be used in blended learning to support catch-up learning as well as on-going remedial support.

**Goal 3: Every Child is Protected from Violence and Exploitation**

*Instilling system responses for prevention of violence:*

Growing COVID-19 cases isolated children and families, turning to more digital solutions for children’s learning, socialization and play that provide opportunities as well as potential risks of online violence.

The CO used this momentum to accelerate its programming on cyber safety, organizing 7 webinars for 350 children, parents and specialists. Through these initiatives, the CO leveraged the business expertise of MTS, a key telecommunications company, that included co-creation of digital information resources to promote cyber safety for children. UNICEF also supported online counselling on Internet security via kids.pomogut.by, through which 520 children, parents and teachers received qualified consultations on VAC prevention issues.

At the same time, UNICEF with UNDP and UNFPA raised public awareness on VAC/VAW and built capacity of key target groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. Synergizing on the three agencies’ mandates, issues included prevention of bullying among children, reproductive health of women with disabilities and entrepreneurial skills of women in rural areas. Coordinating initiatives, the agencies conducted an online marathon to address the influence of COVID-19 on VAC/VAW, with more than 900 viewers participating. From the resources, an Internet platform is being developed for women and children who experienced violence, including information about crisis situations and signals of PSTD, followed with short self-help videos and tools, and referral to existing support services available for
System Strengthening for Family-based Care:

While the number of children in residential care is decreasing, weakening socio-economic circumstances compounded by COVID-19 create higher risks to families with children that could increase possibilities of child separation and potential institutionalization.

In early 2020, the MOE led the approval of the 2020-2023 intersectoral de-institutionalization strategic plan. To advance this plan and enhance support to families and accelerate de-institutionalization (DI) of children, the CO with a Gomel CSO and the local administration integrated the case management approach into social support for young children and children with disabilities. Working with 35 children under four years (U4) who were orphans or without parental care, 27 were placed in foster families, and after the removal of quarantine restrictions in residential institutions, 3 were returned to biological families. The work with partners in Gomel region also enhanced 155 specialists’ capacities to organize work with families raising children U4 and 30 foster parents’ abilities to support young children, including children with disabilities.

Maintaining a high-level dialogue on de-institutionalization, the CO with the MOE and UNICEF regional office arranged an interagency online forum on deinstitutionalization of children with disabilities, which resulted in the MOE’s commitment to establish an interagency task force on DI to accelerate responses.

Enhancing Restorative Practices:

In 2020, the CO advocated for greater restorative practices for children in conflict with the law. Collaborating with CSOs, social pedagogical centres, and local administrations, the CO advanced the restorative service model developed in 2019, establishing the new service in four social pedagogical centres across Belarus. All 9 Minsk district social pedagogical centres committed to roll-out the restorative service initially developed in the Leninsky district centre. The CO also collaborated with the Republican Association of Barristers and CSOs to enhance legal aid and referral pathways, responding to increased needs for legal consultations.

To raise legal professionals’ awareness about restorative justice practices, the CO established an online training course on justice for children, as well as webinars on child-friendly interviewing techniques. The CO also strove to address public misconceptions, stereotypes and stigma towards children in conflict with the law.
Goal 4: Every Child lives in a Safe and Clean Environment

Enhancing Critical Resources to Combat COVID-19:

The CO’s capacity to provide resources was significantly increased through business partnerships, resulting in approximately $360,000 USD to the office’s fundraising flash appeal. With flexible resources, the CO procured personal protective equipment and other resources that enabled approximately 38,000 healthcare staff to be better protected and respond timely to the needs of COVID-19 infected patients and children.

Effective coordination among UN agencies also contributed to timely procurement of critical COVID resources. As the lead agency for the procurement working group, UNICEF collaborated with other UN agencies to identify needs among different sectors and define which agencies are best placed to respond. Through this collaboration, UN agencies agreed with the MOH to support key COVID-19 medical equipment and PPE procurement within Belarus’ World Bank loan.

Increasing Risk Communication and Community Engagement:

To limit infection, the CO produced information, communication, and education materials on physical distancing, personal hygiene measures, use of face masks and handwashing techniques. The CO translated and disseminated the global UNICEF COVID-19 poster to inform about prevention and hygiene practices, distributing over 100,000 copies in all public places. The CO widely used social media platforms to amplify COVID-19 prevention messaging, resulting in a 35% increase of social media followers. By end-December, almost 2.3 million people received COVID-19 messages on prevention and access to services.

The CO’s COVID-19 communication also focused on behaviour change regarding personal hygiene practices as well as physical distancing, with two national campaigns. The ‘Clean Trend’ handwashing campaign based in pre-schools and schools concentrates on physical distancing, handwashing, hygiene rules and mask wearing. Varied information outreach is being used, including billboards, radio and TV ads, posters and stickers on COVID-19 prevention in schools, animations and ‘virtual masks’ in Instagram, and a book of COVID-19 fairytales for pre-school children, with distribution to every region. The second hygiene campaign will follow-up with messages not only on physical health but also mental health and stigma reduction.

Goal 5: Every Child has an Equitable Chance in Life

Using the Power of Evidence for Children:
In 2020, the CO partnered with BelStat to enhance Belarus’ capacity to report on and monitor SDGs, finalizing MICS6 that included baselines for 21 SDG indicators for children.

Another key research measured the multidimensional child poverty (MDCP) in Belarus, employing the Commitment to Equity for Children methodology that advocates use of the MDCP approach as a tool to better allocate public spending at the national and regional levels. This tool identified the direct and indirect effects of public financial resources for children and adolescents, providing policy simulations with different scenarios for coverage and impact for children. These findings informed the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection’s decision to expand a cash transfer programme for families with many children to mitigate the COVID-19 impact, increasing coverage for an additional 6,000 families.

The CO also enhanced evidence generation on child rights through various studies and an evaluation on children with disabilities to inform programming and policy planning.

**Winning Support for Children with Disabilities:**

The multi-year, national campaign, “Just Kids,” works to reduce public’s negative feelings towards children with disabilities, as well as awkwardness and fear in people’s communication and interaction with children with disabilities.

The campaign started with a baseline survey revealing that 64% of respondents had negative emotions when thinking about children with disabilities, such as pity, grief, sympathy, feelings of inferiority or regret.

With the onset of COVID-19, communication channels were altered with intensified use of social media, video and radio outreach. Powerful messages were established to raise personal awareness about the isolation that children with disabilities and families face daily, linking these feelings to those felt by many people caused by COVID-19.

A second November 2020 survey revealed a 9% reduction in the public’s lack of knowledge about children with disabilities and a 4% increase in the number of respondents who saw children with disabilities as children first.

**Winning Support for Adolescents as Agents of Change:**
A key programme priority for the CO is to empower adolescents and young people to formulate positive behaviour models and engage in society on issues critical to them. Over 2020, the office built adolescents’ and young people’s capacities while adapting to the changing situations of COVID-19.

Through UPSHIFT social project initiatives, the CO enhanced adolescents’ capacities to articulate their aspirations and have their views acknowledged. With the onset of COVID-19, the office shifted initiatives online, developing six video instructions to enable adolescents to build their skills in safe and often remote modes. Through UPSHIFT, 150 adolescents gained leadership and critical thinking skills, designing 14 social initiatives at the local level to voice their concerns and create solutions on issues such as gender issues, environment-friendly practices and mental health.

The CO also enhanced 200 volunteers’ and 70 volunteer coordinators’ leadership capacities. Partnering with the Republican Volunteer Centre (RVC), the CO developed guidelines on how to volunteer safely during COVID-19, as well as provided booklets and leaflets dispelling misinformation about COVID-19. Through these resources and capacity building initiatives, the CO expanded adolescents’ opportunities to become agents of change. Collaborating with the RVC, youth-friendly health centres and CSOs, the CO trained 15 young people and provided them with medical supervision to conduct online peer-to-peer information outreach on COVID-19 through a developed chatbot. Adolescents living with HIV also provided specialized peer consultations on facts about HIV and COVID-19.

**UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships**

Increased partnerships across UN agencies, businesses and volunteers enabled the CO to mobilize significant resources to better address children’s needs.

Under the leadership of the Resident Coordinator’s office, the UN country team established working groups to strengthen COVID-19 responses across the agencies. UNICEF led the procurement working group and co-led the socio-economic working group with UNDP. Partnering with UNDP and UNFPA, UNICEF is supporting the Ministry of Health in a large procurement for COVID-19 responses under a World Bank loan. Joint collaboration with UN agencies enabled greater coordination on development strategies to address the socio-economic impact of COVID on vulnerable populations including children and their families. UNICEF together with the World Bank conducted a series of rapid assessments that measured how COVID-19 affected vulnerable families. Findings have informed UNICEF’s and UN agencies’ responses and have been shared with the Government for policy planning and decision-making.
The Office broadened partnerships with the private sector, creating a flash appeal to COVID-19 where 7 companies participated to supply PPE and critical medical equipment. Businesses’ flexible processes enabled rapid mobilization of resources and actions, resulting in enhanced intersectoral coordination across the Government, the private sector and UNICEF that enabled transport and delivery of 140 oxygen concentrators from China. Partnerships with businesses did not stop at financing but involved co-creating projects with businesses such as in a webinar series and information campaign on cyber safety and prevention of cyber bullying that reached approximately 350 parents, teachers, children and adolescents. Private sector partnership was also critical in piloting a case management approach in Gomel region.

To enhance opportunities for private sector partnerships, the CO conducted a mapping of the business landscape, as well as trained office staff on ‘business for results (B4R),’ with development of an all-office B4R action plan to more strategically harness the power of business to achieve results for children.

Equally important for the CO during COVID-19 was partnering with community influencers such as goodwill ambassadors, UNICEF friends and celebrities on critical child rights interventions. These stakeholders accelerated UNICEF messages to broader population groups. Involvement of these partners brought new perspectives to the CO’s interventions and created innovative approaches that have raised public engagement in child-related issues.

Building on the office’s growing volunteer capacity, young people were mobilized to become agents of change providing peer counselling on information about COVID-19 and psycho-social support through online tools such as chatbots. At the same time, the office partnered with the Republican Volunteering Centre to build volunteers’ skills on project development and communication, as well as critical information on UNICEF’s agenda and SDG goals. Resources were provided to young people to inform them about volunteering opportunities during COVID-19. The office also focused on creating a positive image of volunteering, with the establishment of a video testament by young volunteers about how their experiences enabled them to grow personally while delivering results for children and their communities. The video was published in one of the largest Belarusian media channels with more than 15,000 views.
In 2020, the Country Office (CO) had to substantially change its programming, operations and resource mobilization due to COVID-19 and compounded by the political turmoil following the August elections.

While Belarus held digitalization as a key strategic development goal, defining it as an SDG accelerator, lessons from 2020 underscored the need to build sectors’ capacities on how to use technologies and revealed how technology can amplify opportunities for social inclusion and access to services.

With COVID-19, technology became a critical tool for people’s daily interactions from connection with relatives and friends to obtaining of services and information. However, a large portion of people did not have the skills to transfer quickly to online interaction. The office took significant steps to train partners on online approaches and enhance its own efforts through new online formats such as webinars, chatbots and talk shows. These experiences showed how amplified use of technology in information and services create opportunities for vulnerable child groups such as children with disabilities to be better included in their communities and among their peers. UNICEF promoted with partners use of technology as a key instrument for resource mobilization, as well as e-counselling in the health sector and introduction of online education approaches for blended learning in secondary schools.

Due to the difficult epidemiological situation of COVID-19, attendance at early intervention centres, providing medico-social services for young children with special education needs and disabilities, dropped by 60 - 65% over spring 2020. However, continuity of regular interventions for these children’s development remained critical. These families were becoming more isolated, dealing with their children’s issues on their own, avoiding traveling to the centres to reduce risks of infection. While the Ministry of Health’s Order No. 1270 (dated November 27, 2018) provided for the possibility of teleworking with families, ECI center specialists lacked the skills to implement such operational models, combined with a scarcity of the required technical equipment. The situation of COVID-19 magnified the need for this approach.

UNICEF in partnership with lead ECI centres is now developing an e-counselling training programme with roll-out in 2021. While the approach will enhance accessibility of children with disabilities to the ECI services during the COVID-19 pandemic, it will also create the tools for greater outreach to families for ‘routine’ services where the children are supported in their daily environments (e.g. home, on playground, etc.).
The experience in schools revealed the potential role for remote learning. While schools did not officially move to remote learning, UNICEF surveys in spring 2020 showed that approximately 40% of children did not attend classes due to fear of COVID-19 infection. Towards the end of 2020, the Ministry of Education started working to create opportunities for distance and online learning opportunities in primary and secondary schools though the establishment of a specific educational platform. In this capacity, UNICEF has also initiated partnership with the Belarusian Academy of Post-Graduate Education to create a training programme to build teachers’ skills on online learning as this shift requires different approaches in presentation and interaction with students than in classes conducted offline. As with the integration of ECI e-counselling, enhancement of online learning tools could strengthen in the longer term the education system’s capacities for blended learning to respond to the challenges of delivering inclusive quality education for all children, as well as equip students and teachers with the 21st century skills and competences they need to develop their full potential.

Increased parenting and adolescent-related programming in digital media platforms should also be applied in future to maximize outreach and impact. Digital outreach, blended with face-to-face services for primary healthcare (e.g. e-counselling) and education responses, can increase children’s and families’ access to services and foster greater inclusion.

The rapidly changing environment has highlighted the importance to equip adolescents and youth with online learning skills and access to information for coping in crisis situations. UPSHIFT methodology will continue to be used to build social innovation skills among adolescents and youth, motivating them for development of creative ideas on how to promote mental health and life skills through social networks, apps, online courses and e-platforms.

Another important takeaway from 2020 was the need for the office to have strengthened digital media presence and programme delivery. Social media has traditionally provided important platforms for child rights dialogue and advocacy, yet the COVID-19 situation reinforced the need for the office to use actively digital platforms to deliver programmes and enhance child-related messages to the public. The office’s diversification of online outreach resulted in a 35% increase in social media followers, in turn allowing amplification of messages during COVID-19. The office also advocated to government partners for greater use of digital tools for outreach on child rights, resulting in the Government’s prioritization of interactive, innovative technology approaches (e.g. online counselling or chatbots) within the 2021-2025 National Programme on the Health of the Nation and Democratic Security.

Overall, the necessity for accelerated digital responses for information outreach and services called for by the COVID-19 response created the lessons for future programming with a broader integration of technological solutions that can increase children’s and families’ access to an array of services that are critical for their health, well-being, social inclusion and development.