

Congo

Update on the context and situation of children

2020 was the first year of the Government of Congo-UNICEF country programme of cooperation 2020-2024. A year shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, Congo continued to preserve peace and resilience, as well as a positive normative environment where children's rights remained central to the country's development priorities, amid the challenges presented by the unprecedented pandemic.

Highly dependent on oil production, the Republic of Congo did not take advantage of the resource booms of past economic cycles to diversify or invest in productive sectors and, since 2014, the declining oil prices has resulted in a persistent economic downturn.

After some signs of modest growth in 2019 (around 2%), 2020 should have been one of a more sustained economic recovery, thanks to the approval by the Executive Board of the IMF, in July 2019, of a three-year arrangement under its Extended Credit Facility (ECF) for US \$448.6 million aimed to restore macroeconomic stability and lay the foundations for higher and more inclusive growth. Unfortunately, the programme was suspended after six months of implementation as many commitments could not be implemented by the Congolese government. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation, creating thus a triple threat of a multidimensional nature with serious impact on health, economy and social situation of the most vulnerable households and communities.

The COVID-19 crisis called for the revision of the growth forecast for the year 2020. Initially forecast at 4.6%, it was revised downwards to -9.7% after the announcement and application of government measures to curb the spread of the pandemic. This drastic drop in GDP is explained in large part by the contraction of non-oil activities (-9.1%), the deterioration of public finances and shocks to domestic supply and demand. With such a level of economic growth, this could jeopardise the progress made towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and children's rights.

This pandemic has also highlighted the underlying structural inequalities, and inadequate social protection, health and education systems. With 43% of Congolese who live below the poverty line, the pandemic and the lockdown measures implemented have exacerbated an already slow-moving economy. As such, 78% of households have seen their income decreased during the lockdown and 83% of households have contracted debts during that period, (40% borrowing for the purchase of food and 34.5% for health expenses) according to the survey on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic carried out in June 2020 by the WFP. The COVID-19 pandemic is also disrupting food systems and deteriorating vulnerable household food security as an estimated 50% of households in areas hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic are reporting not having enough food to eat.

This situation is worrying in a country where the formal social security system covers only 15% of the population -those working in the formal sector of the economy- with limited benefits. Also, the existing non-contributory social protection programme such as Lisungi social transfer programme for vulnerable livelihoods in the informal sector is still at small scale. There are good prospects for extending non-contributory social protection on a large scale given the efforts made by the government during the lockdown as 200,000 households were assisted versus 10,000 households within the regular Lisungi programme.

Lockdown measures worsened children and women's vulnerability and gender inequalities. The socio-economic impacts assessment carried-out by the UN system in August 2020 revealed an increase in domestic tasks and the inequity in the distribution of work to the disadvantage of children and women;

an increase in gender-based violence; the suspension of support for victims in psycho-medical care centres; and failure to take the gender dimension into account in the preparation and implementation of the response.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic had a strong impact on the functioning of the already fragile health system. First, the redeployment of health personnel as well as the requisition of some health centres and services for the care of COVID-19 patients have deeply disrupted continued provision of basic health services. Secondly, there was a significant decline in the use of health services, the disruption of some health programmes such as HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis, the decrease of vaccine coverage rate, and the decline in the number of admissions and consultations for malaria which is yet one of the main causes of morbidity and mortality in Congo. Thirdly, increased fear and stigmatisation of certain health centres and increase in self-medication given the low attendance of health facilities.

In addition to the structural problems experienced by the education sector such as the inadequate financial resources, the lack of infrastructure and equipment, the significant deficit in qualified human resources or the spatial disparities in the education supply, the sector has been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of educational institutions between March and October 2020 which affected 1,474,372 learners, has highlighted issues related to access to education as well as other socio-economic problems such as school dropouts, dependence on school canteens for food, or the inequalities in access to technology as a means of ensuring the continuity of learning.

Congo is still facing significant challenges with refugees and Internal Displaced People (IDPs). The Likouala region alone is hosting more than 27,000 refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR) and 21,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). One third of the asylum-seekers are children in need of psychosocial support and education. More than 77,000 internally displaced persons (50% children) have returned home following the 2017 ceasefire agreements in the Pool region. Following heavy rains recorded in October 2019 and 2020 in four regions (Cuvette, Likouala, Plateaux and Sangha), at least 170,000 people have been affected including the refugees and asylum seekers in Likouala and Plateaux regions. These populations are struggling to access basic social services.

It should be noted that no emergency resource mobilisation was possible through OCHA owing to the focus on the COVID-19 response. With a prospect of another consecutive year of floods in 2021 and the on-going focus on COVID-19, prevention and resilience building of affected populations should be put in place.

Major contributions and drivers of results

COVID-19 made 2020 a rather difficult year. While the pandemic and health crisis were challenging, there were also opportunities presented to apply different approaches to programming and leverage partnerships and resources.

In this context, the country office (CO) re-programmed interventions to support the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic within the coordinated UN response. In addition, the country office implemented the change management plan within the framework of the new country programme 2020-2024. While focusing on COVID-19 response activities, the CO pursued actions to achieve results both at the upstream level with numerous strategies and policies being approved, and in generating evidence to advance results for children.

The CO supported the response to two humanitarian emergencies namely the preparedness to the Ebola virus following an outbreak in DRC's neighbouring Equatorial province, and floods that affected over 170,000 people in four regions.

Goal area 1: Every child survives and thrives, aims to improve access to high-quality and equitable maternal, neonatal, child health and nutrition services for children aged 0 to 10 years by strengthening multisectoral service delivery systems and building national capacities to provide an essential package of high-quality, high-impact, integrated services throughout the first decade of a child's life, including the first 1,000 days.

Key Result for Children 1 (immunisation) aims to ensure that 90% of children 0-11 months are vaccinated with 3 doses of DTP-containing/Penta vaccine nationally. This Key Result for Children is on track. Since 2017 there has been a 10% increase coverage and the CO expects to close the 10% gap remaining to reach the 90% target by the end of 2021.

In 2020, the CO supported the health providers by strengthening their capacities to deliver quality and integrated services in the field of immunisation. Seizing the opportunity of the Maternal and Child health week, 29,294 children aged 0-11 months were vaccinated against measles and rubeola, 24,516 for the third dose of Pentavalent (including 128 indigenous) and 23,777 for the first dose of Pentavalent (including 127 indigenous children), which increased coverage from 70% to 84% for Penta 1, from 67% to 77% for Penta 3 and from 55% to 72% for RR in the targeted regions. Continued efforts through community mobilisation were placed to prevent Polio. A national Polio campaign is planned for the first quarter of 2021.

The Vaccine Independence Initiative (VII) mechanism has positioned the CO as a critical partner in supplies procurement, including for the response against COVID-19, but also to strengthen the strategic role of UNICEF in advocacy to secure domestic financing for priority programmes for children. Congo has been meeting its obligations amid financial crisis. The country reimbursed US\$ 4.5 million while prepositioning US\$ 2.3 million for VII 2020.

In order to involve the community in the maintenance of cold chain equipment, the CO trained and equipped 53 young community volunteers and supervisors (health providers) to ensure the maintenance of cold chain equipment in health centres in Pointe Noire and Kouilou regions. Lessons learned from this innovative experience will be documented for scaling up.

Key Result for Children 2 (nutrition) aims to ensure that at least 90 % of U5 children, pregnant & lactating women in Congo have good nutritional status.

Through routine growth monitoring services, 272, 286 children from 0-59 months were seen, while mothers were sensitised on the importance of Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) practices. During these visits, 73,701 among 84,764 (87.0 %) mothers reported exclusively breastfeeding their children from 0-6 months.

During the Maternal and Child Health Week in October 2020, 223,009 children under 5 were examined at home for malnutrition and 2,961 cases of malnutrition (moderate and acute) were detected and treated. The Maternal and Child Health Week (MCHW) also increased the number of children screened at home for malnutrition from 205,559 to 452,568. Approximately 7,410 cases of malnourished children were identified and referred for treatment. 144,407 children aged 6-59 months received Vitamin A supplementation, bringing the total number of children supplemented with Vitamin A between January and November 2020 from 195,332 to 339,739. This increased the coverage of children aged 6-59 months who received at least one dose of vitamin A from 51% to 89%.

During the World Breastfeeding Week celebrated in Brazzaville, 34,368 women (8123 pregnant and 19,966 lactating) and 2194 men were sensitised on the importance of exclusive and continuing breastfeeding.

Regarding Maternal and newborn health, to reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the

health services utilisation, continuity of services was vital. Collaboration between the Ministry of Health, UNICEF and WHO contributed to ensuring immunisation, nutrition, Vitamin A supplementation, prenatal and postnatal care, HIV care, while using innovative approaches to be adaptive to COVID-19 scenarios.

As a result, 19,320 pregnant women, including 4,830 adolescents under the age of 18, had their first antenatal care and 13,735 other had their 4th antenatal care; 14,114 newborns benefited from a postnatal consultation; 1,159 community health workers and 1,150 health workers were trained on the integrated package of services (including vaccination, supplementation, deworming, identification and referral of malnutrition and community sensitisation on Infection Prevention Control (IPC)). 49,000 households in the country's 12 regions were visited by community health workers. As a result, 19,144 pregnant/breastfeeding women or mothers of children under 5 years of age and 38,006 other targets were sensitised on the promotion of essential family health, nutrition and sanitation practices, including prevention against COVID-19 and Ebola. With a Gap analysis tool, the least covered localities were identified by department and specific nutrition, health and WASH interventions will be delivered in 2021.

The CO contributed to the development of the national community health strategy which will serve as a basis to strengthening community action to promote essential family practices, community resilience and integrated management of childhood illness. The strategy brings together all the interventions currently being implemented on a sectoral basis.

Regarding HIV and AIDS, the CO strengthened collaboration with the Ministry of Health and partners towards the implementation of Point of Care (POC) in a bid to improve prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV.

Concerning Health in emergency, UNICEF Congo supported the Ministry of Health COVID-19 response, focusing on continuity of primary health care services with an emphasis on stopping community transmission of COVID-19.

GOAL AREA 2 "Every child learns" aims at ensuring that school-age children and adolescent boys and girls, especially the most vulnerable, receive adequate services, learn and develop in a conducive environment free from violence and abuse. The strategies used to advance Key Result for Children 4, Improved learning outcomes, were system strengthening, service delivery, capacity development and advocacy.

UNICEF supported the development of the 2021-2030 Education Sector Strategy which is aligned with the 2030 Education Agenda and SDG 4. Its implementation will strengthen the education system and will bring positive changes to formal and non-formal education on access, quality, equity and inclusion of all children, including the most marginalised and disadvantaged children. The CO mobilised resources from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) within the framework of "pedagogical continuity and resilience of the Congolese education system facing COVID-19", in collaboration with the ministries of education, UN agencies and the Education Results Group.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF provided technical and financial support to implement the Emergency Plan for pedagogical continuity through family education. The CO helped strengthen the capacity of teachers and social services providers in education in regions facing humanitarian hazard. UNICEF provided technical and financial assistance to introduce "dual" face-to-face and distance learning system through the creation of the "Online Television and Radio School" platform which is currently operational.

As a result, 324,200 children (158,039 girls and 166,161 boys) were enrolled in formal and non-formal education, including 297,074 students (144,705 girls and 152,369 boys) in the official exam classes of the end of primary education (6th level), lower secondary education (10th level) and upper secondary

education (13th level) who received pedagogical continuity through family education. Furthermore, 3,163 of them at the 6th level of primary school (1,564 girls and 1599 boys) and 25,814 students of other levels (12,596 girls and 13,218 boys) received school kits before the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, 1,312 students (738 girls and 574 boys) of the 3rd level of the re-schooling centres registered in official exams, received training to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 and were equipped with reusable protective masks.

These interventions have resulted in improved school results, especially for children in secondary education, whose success rates improved, reaching 81.51% in 2020 compared to 53.25% in 2019 for lower secondary, and 40.21% in 2020 compared to 30.44% in 2019 for upper secondary students. The success rate in primary education decreased, reaching 76.68% in 2020 compared to 95.72% in 2019.

Regarding education in emergency, UNICEF provided support to 17,379 displaced children who received school kits. 110 teachers of the Emergency sectoral working group were trained on education in emergency situations. As a result, school success rates in official exams for students at the end of primary cycle (6th level), has been 97% (98.56% girls and 95.91% boys) in Plateaux region and 80.32% (81.04% girls and 79.66% boys) in Pool region, above the national average of 76.68% (78.25% girls and 75.16% boys).

Goal area 3: Every child is protected from violence and exploitation: The focus made aims at creating an environment in which children and adolescents, aged 10 to 18 years, are protected and free from violence, exploitation and abuse. The strategies used to advance in Key Result for Children 5 (Protection of children from violence, have included advocacy, system strengthening and service delivery.

To mark CRC@31, the CO launched the Report on Gender-based violence in schools and online violence during a high-level dialogue with several Ministers, stakeholders and children. The high-level dialogue resulted in Government ownership of the results and the agreement to implement the recommendations of the report. The CO developed tools that enabled health, social and justice services to share data that helped highlight cases of violence against children in five cities. This exercise unveiled 88 cases of sexual violence to girls under ten years of age, who were treated in health centres. Eight children victims of trafficking from Benin, were safely repatriated home with UNICEF's support.

In Sibiti district, thanks to UNICEF supported 17 child protection committees, 909 (474 girls and 435 boys) received certificates in 2020.

UNICEF provided technical assistance to elaborate the 2021-2025 National Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Strategy, which was endorsed in December 2020. The strategy will enable relevant coordinated response to GBV. A first result has been the creation of a green line (#1444) for survivors and witnesses of gender-based violence cases.

The CO supported the Ministry of Social Affairs and Humanitarian Action to elaborate the 2014-2020 report of the African Charter on the Rights and Child Welfare. This report provides information on the reforms of article 453 of the Penal Code which specify the right to information enabling young people to be heard and defended by a lawyer in all proceedings concerning them. Its approval will contribute to the achievement of SDG #16 on access to adequate and quality juvenile justice.

With a view to develop an Adolescents' Empowerment and Participation strategic plan 2021-2024, CO conducted a participatory and inclusive dialogue with Government counterparts, UN agencies and other stakeholders.

Goal area 4: "Every child lives in a safe and clean environment" aims at improving

access to high-quality and equitable WASH services for children.

In support to the Key Result for Children 8 (Ending open defecation), the CO provided technical and financial support to improve the enabling environment by supporting the development of the policy on hygiene, sanitation and water. This great step aims to strengthen the institutional framework of the WASH sector. It gives the vision of the sector for the horizon 2030, the different strategic axes and will help to strengthen the legal and institutional framework of the sanitation sub-sector that has been coordinated by different ministries until now. UNICEF will continue to support the Ministry of Energy and Hydraulic to develop a roadmap for its implementation. In order to strengthen planning, an inventory document is being finalised. It will be the prioritisation tool for equitable sector interventions. Furthermore, continued efforts to mobilise communities to embrace positive practices to prevent open defecation remained at the heart of keeping communities free from OD. The CO supported 17,772 people to live in Open-defecation free communities through community engagement and participation.

Regarding WASH in emergency, the CO provided 62 hand washing stations in 21 schools in Brazzaville and Likouala to ensure a safe return to school. UNICEF also distributed 450 hand washing stations and 3,150 soap bars in 84 schools. These interventions are coupled with communication activities which aim to promote awareness and deliver social and behavioural change messages and promote hygienic practices, especially among key influencers and community groups.

Goal area 5: Every child has an equitable chance in life: The aim is to ensure that girls and boys in the most vulnerable areas are benefitting from inclusive social policies and increased resources. In 2020, the CO focused its interventions on evidence-based advocacy, Public Finance for Children (PF4C) and Communication for Development.

The CO developed a Partnerships strategy 2020-2024 which will help to strengthen the spectrum of private and public partners in order to achieve better results for children. It complements the Resource mobilisation strategy developed to strengthen UNICEF Congo ability to leverage and mobilise resources for the well-being of Congolese children.

Regarding Public Finance for Children (PF4C), the CO continued to support financial analysis to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of budgetary allocations and spending. UNICEF produced two budget briefs for health and education sector as advocacy tools which aim to show the extent to which health and education budgets are responsive to children's needs and rights, thus providing the necessary evidence for advocacy and decision-making for a better allocation and use of resources in the social sectors. Each budget brief contains an impact action plan and recommendations to be implemented.

To support the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CO has conducted two knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) surveys. First, a telephone survey in the twelve regions of Congo which aimed to assess the KAP of the Congolese population in relation to the coronavirus pandemic. The second was conducted in 100 schools in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire. Both will inform the efforts put in place for an effective communication strategy on COVID-19.

As part of the data collection and evidence generation, UNICEF in partnership with WFP is supporting technical and financially the government to carry-out the SMART nutrition survey, combined with two studies, one on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the use of maternal and child health services and another on nutritional security. These studies are being carried under the technical supervision of the Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Statistics. The field work has commenced in January 2021.

The CO worked on the Technology for Development (T4D) and Innovation Strategy 2020-2024. The strategy will guide efforts towards putting innovations and T4D at the core of programming to achieve

results.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

The UN Resident Coordinator and the UN Country Team (UNCT) continued to ensure the strategic, coherent and efficient functioning of the UN System in Congo under the UN Delivering as One (DaO) approach. In 2020, progress was made in terms of joint advocacy, policy dialogue and partnerships to promote human rights and to mobilise financial resources.

UNICEF's annual review was conducted in the framework of the UNSDCF (UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework) annual review. Together with the Ministry of Social Affairs, UNICEF is the co-lead of the "Human Capital" component of the UNSDCF, which comprises Education, WASH, Health/Nutrition/HIV and Social Protection. UNICEF also leads and convenes the Education and WASH results group.

The United Nations System has also strengthened its coordination mechanisms and agreed to develop three joint programmes in 2021. Three agencies, UNICEF, WFP and WHO continue to lead the implementing the SDG Fund Joint Programme that contributes to the Government's efforts in improving living conditions and access to social protection for indigenous people.

As part of the coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic, an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the socio-economic situation in Republic of Congo and a recovery plan was conducted with the involvement of all UN agencies.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) COVID-19 emergency funding enabled UNICEF to support the Government to ensure the continuity of education for children during the school closure and safe schools opening for the school year 2020-2021. As co-lead of the Local Education Results Group and lead of the education development partners, UNICEF contributed to sectoral coordination with the view to provide appropriate responses to the impact of the COVID-19 on the Education System.

The CO continued to support the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement in collaboration with FAO and WFP. A SUN self-assessment was conducted in 2020 and did not reveal progress since 2019 and resource mobilisation remains a primary challenge for the movement. As a result, UNICEF contributed to the launch of two chapters, one for civil society and another for the private sector, with the aim to broaden participation and improve coordination.

The CO also contributed to the setting up and training of an inter-agency PSEA working group. As a result, several inter-agency training of partners, and evaluations, have taken place in collaboration with other agencies.

UNICEF partnered with the Boy Scout and Girls Guides of Congo (BSGGC) to put children and adolescents at the forefront of the response to COVID-19. For example, 492 adolescents (269 girls and 223 boys) were trained on prevention measures and communication techniques that allowed them to mobilise -and raise awareness on COVID-19- to their peers in schools, health centres and marketplaces. Young bloggers trained by BSGGC also participated in social media monitoring to reach nearly 28,000 people. The CO also supported the organisation of the Youth Challenge initiative which allowed adolescents to demonstrate their talent and creativity in terms of project design and problem-solving capacity.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Duty of Care. In the context of COVID-19, staff protection and safety have emerged as a priority for the Country Office (CO) management team throughout the year 2020. With the containment measures taken by the government to limit the spread of COVID-19, which hampered the implementation of the programmes, it was necessary to reimagine the working methods to reconcile the protection of the staff and the achievement of results for children.

The CO stayed and delivered amid COVID-19 pandemic. Flexible work arrangements were put in place, and all measures taken to put into practice the UN protocol while supporting government efforts to respond to the pandemic and galvanising all partnerships and capacities to achieve results for children.

Transforming the crisis into an opportunity. The assessment of the socio-economic impacts of COVID in the Republic of Congo revealed the fragility of the health, education and social protection systems, as well as the resurgence of inequalities between different social groups. For UNICEF and the United Nations system, supporting the government was a unique chance to turn crisis into an opportunity for the establishment of a framework of policies and strategies genuinely focused on reducing inequalities and reimagining the fulfilment of the rights of children in Congo. For example, the current strategic axes of the National Development Plan provided a good platform for cooperation and coordination among UN agencies. Weaknesses identified in the social protection systems will need to be analysed as part of the mid-term review of the 2018-2022 National Development Plan.

Also, UNICEF Congo was able to support the Government with innovative approaches that will be mainstreamed in 2021. One of these is the provision of distance learning through written press and media (radio and television). Despite the closure of all schools at the national level for 74 days (March 18 to May 31, 2020), home-based learning was key for the results achieved by nearly 297,000 children conducting official exams and to resume classes for one month before these exams.

Data and evidence for improved advocacy, equity and protection. In its efforts to strengthen the data collection system, UNICEF created data analysis tools that have allowed to identify gaps in the health and protection sectors. For maternal and child health, the CO developed a Gap analysis tool. This has enabled the provision of basic health interventions to the least covered localities which have been identified, segregated by region and type of intervention. A similar tool was tested in five cities that allowed health, social and justice services to share data that helped highlight cases of violence against children. This unveiled 88 cases of sexual violence to girls under ten years of age showing the need to have integrated and multisectoral reporting and case management mechanisms.

UNICEF's positioning as an evidence leader was highlighted with the presentation of the results of the Report on Gender-based violence in schools and online violence, during a high-level dialogue, a first timer in the country, during which children interacted directly with three Government ministers on this issue. The dialogue was recorded and will be used as advocacy material in 2021. As a result, a multisectoral technical committee was set up that will roll-out the recommendations of the report.

Advocacy and Cross border collaboration between Government, UN and bilateral partners proved key to allow eight children victims of trafficking from Benin to be safely repatriated home. This would not have been possible without the involvement of both Governments, country offices and the Embassy of the United States.

Inclusiveness and a multisectoral approach facilitate decision making and action. For example, the multisectoral and holistic coordination between all stakeholders involved in addressing gender based-violence, facilitated the elaboration and endorsement of the National Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Strategy and a costed action plan.

Going Forward. To continue with this line of work, and building on lessons learnt, UNICEF will produce several studies in 2021 including one on Child trafficking and another on street children, both in partnership with the Ministries of Justice, of Social Affairs and of Planning. In addition, under the coordination of WCARO, the country is engaged in the process of preparing three multi-country evaluations for KRC #1 (Immunisation), KRC #5 (violence) and for the response to COVID-19. These evaluations will further strengthen future programming to improve results for children.

The VII mechanism will remain a vital platform for efficient and effective delivery of vaccines and essential health commodities. UNICEF will continue to play a critical role as a trusted partner in supplies procurement, including for COVID-19. UNICEF's strategic position will further contribute to enhanced advocacy to secure domestic financing for priority programmes especially those that cover children. UNICEF will continue to strengthen the Government's supply and procurement capacity and will coordinate with technical and financial partners such as Gavi, World Bank and the Global Fund to improve planning and prevent stock-outs, while promoting the allocation of national resources.

In hindsight, the CO was able to build the necessary pillars during the first year of the programme of cooperation on which the CO can continue to build on to accelerate results for children. However, considering the contextual environment and the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, it is key that UNICEF and the UN system focus more on supporting the Government to generate and allocate domestic resources for essential social services. Such resilient and decisive measure from government will prevent deterioration of key indicators towards the achievement of SDGs by 2030.