The year 2020 seriously challenged the progresses being made by Sao Tome and Principe (STP) towards the achievement of the Key results for Children (KRCs) and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal Agenda (SDGs). It also brought unprecedented opportunities both for advocacy and partnerships in the areas of prevention and response to violence against children, access to education, vaccination and WASH among others.

Following the record of first cases of COVID19 in the central African Region and in Portugal with whom STP had direct flight connection, the government declared State of Emergency on 17th March 2020 and adopted a national preparedness and response plan including measures mainly in the area of health. Air borders were shut down and on March 24th, 2020, all the 209 schools of the country were closed, keeping almost 30,000 children and adolescents at home. Following the initial phase of health-related response planning, and with support from UNICEF, the Ministry of Education developed an education contingency plan.

In July 2020, the government alleviated the restrictive measures and upgraded its capacity of testing and detecting COVID19 in the country. As of end of December 2020, STP had officially recorded a total of 989 cases of COVID-19 and counted for a total of 17 deaths. Accordingly to the UN driven report on the Socio-Economic Impact Assessment (SEIA) the consequences of the pandemic on the livelihoods and well-being of the population of STP, particularly those in poor, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, and on the local economy are becoming very evident and raising concerns in terms of their potential impact on STP’s development trajectory towards graduation from LDC status and achievement of the SDGs. The touristic sector which contributes greatly to STP’s GDP is the hardest hit by the pandemic. Additionally, disruptions to global supply chains, and high levels of demand for commodities such as drugs, medical equipment and food, result in inflationary pressure and in shortages of food and other essential goods and services.

Economic growth in STP was expected to grow in 2020 after several years of low performance, but the IMF’s World Economic Outlook (October 2020) now expects the economy to decrease by 6.5% in 2020, which will be the first recession for STP since 1990. At the end of December 2020, the WB announced additional $ 10 million to support the country recovery from COVID19. Considering the impact of the pandemic on national economy, it will be important to monitor the risk of decreased financing of social sectors including education, health and social protection.

In this context, UNICEF continued to generate evidence for increased investment in priority services for children and their family. With important technical and financial support from UNICEF as well as other partners, MICS6 was finalized. The new data from the 2019 survey confirm encouraging trends in the reduction of neo-natal mortality (from 71/1000 in 2000 to 10/1000 in 2019) and child mortality (from 111/1000 in 2000 to 14/1000 in 2019) and important and consistent increase in vaccination coverage for children. Nevertheless, in 2020 the impact of the pandemic on social sectors has been serious and affected UNICEF performance on the achievement of KRCs. The closure of airports has
led to a breakdown in the supply of essential medicines and there has been an alarming decline in vaccination rates which dropped as low as 50% during the lockdown period thus affecting the achievement of Key Result for Children (KRC) I on Vaccination.

In the area of education, UNICEF started the new year 2020 in the hope to boost the implementation of the new Education Policy Chart and accelerate collaboration with World Bank and Local Education Group to dismantle existing barriers to education. Despite the relative swift action taken by the government and UNICEF with the development of the sector contingency plan, the closure of schools (including 90 pre-schools) has kept children at home requiring supervision and child-care by family members. Whilst measures have been introduced to facilitate remote learning, children in less well-off families often did not have access to ITC equipment and an adequate internet connection to take advantage of this opportunity and risk falling behind in their learning curve.

New MICS6 data on learning outcomes show worrying gaps in both mathematics (only 35.8% proficiency) and reading (38.4% proficiency) as well as completion rate in secondary education as low as 10%. While access has improved at primary and secondary level of education thus supporting the achievement of KRC3, renewed attention should be leveraged to quality education.

Finally, restrictions on movement, quarantine requirements and unemployment have resulted in a notable increase in domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse of women and minors compared with the same period last year. Furthermore, protection and safety mechanisms including social services have themselves been disrupted by the pandemic further restricting the ability of children, women and girls to seek help and assistance. While disaggregated data on violence during the pandemic are not yet available, MICS6 suggests that child protection needs to be prioritized at all levels and that violence is a new silent emergency in the country. More than 83% of children aged 1-14 experienced violent discipline in the month before the survey and more than 13% of women experienced violence. At the end of 2020, the government of Sao Tome and Principe submitted their report on implementation of Human Rights Chart to the Human Rights Council as part of the UPR process. It is to be noted that due to the pandemic it was not possible to take stock of progresses against SDGs through a National Voluntary review which is now scheduled for 2021.

### Major contributions and drivers of results

Both UNICEF programmes and operations were challenged by the breakout of the COVID19 pandemic in the country towards the end of the first trimester of 2020. Nevertheless, the office was able to meet most of results planned in the Annual Management Plan (AMP) and contribute towards the achievement of Country Programme Document (CPD) as well as UNDAF results.

The 2020 Annual management priorities continued to include the consolidation of vaccination programme in line with KRC1. Due to COVID19, in the third trimester, the country registered a stock out of pentavalent vaccines in all districts provoking a decline in vaccination coverage from April to June 2020. In close collaboration with WCARO Supply Team, the country office was able to bring to the country all necessary vaccines by July 2020. In the fourth trimester, UNICEF supported the implementation of supplementary vaccination activities to reach out most vulnerable children who might have missed routine immunization because of the emergency situation. As of December 2020, the immunization rate reached 87% showing a slight decrease compared to the same period of the
2019. UNICEF was able to support the government in honoring its responsibilities towards vaccines financing and to support the smooth implementation of the VII plan. The country office remains confident that Sao Tome and Principe can achieve vaccines coverage universalization if efforts are maintained to preserve routine immunization activities and to continue sensitize caregivers on the importance of vaccines for child survival and development. The newly released MICS6 data confirms a positive trajectory with sustained increase in coverage for all major vaccines in the past 20 years (examples are: Polio vaccine coverage rose from 79.3% in 2000 to 84.3% in 2019, Measles vaccine coverage rose from 78.4% in 2000 to 88.1% in 2019). The emergency situation required UNICEF to readjust its programmatic priorities in support to the national response to the emergency situation. As a consequence, UNICEF reprogrammed part of its RR funds to support the purchase of Protective Personal Equipment (PPE) for health frontline workers. UNICEF was also able to resume provision of essential medicines, including antibiotics and oral rehydration salt, to ensure continuation of essential health services for children. UNICEF supported the resumption of breastfeeding campaigns and communication. Results achieved over the years with regards to coverage exclusive breastfeeding (from 63.9% in 2000 to 79.1% in 2019, MICS6) are encouraging but fragile and need to be sustained. With support from WCARO and in collaboration with WHO, an international consultant was hired to assist the Government to start the implementation of BFHI in all 6 maternitys of the country. Additionally, 65.9% of children from 6–59 months were supplemented with Vitamin A twice.

UNICEF continued to support the PMTCT programme, with the provision of HIV tests and ARV. The rate of vertical transmission is zero, which puts the country on the way to eliminating mother-to-child transmission. These results have been confirmed by the preliminary data of an epidemiological analytical study (Cascade Study) financed by UNICEF in collaboration with WHO.

In the area of WASH, UNICEF continued the expansion of CLTS approach to reduce open defecation. In collaboration with the Ministry of Infrastructures and selected NGOs and despite the pandemic situation, three out of 11 communities were declared Open Defecation Free (ODF) which is an important milestone considering the challenges in terms of behavior change in the country. COVID19 represented an opportunity to advocate for a prioritization of WASH programmes at national level which resulted in successful resource mobilization and the establishment of new partnerships, including with AFD, USAID and Canadian Cooperation with a special focus on WASH in schools. As of end of 2020, UNICEF succeeded in providing technical and financial support for the installation of handwashing facilities in 31 schools and kindergartens (14% of schools), reaching about 4,622 boys and 5,060 girls in urban and rural areas, nationwide. UNICEF has been requested to coordinate WASH partners at national level in order to sustain interventions done by partners and avoid overlaps. Additionally, UNICEF has engaged in high level discussion with Ministry of Infrastructures to build a holistic and long term vision on WASH within the context of urbanization plan.

The expansion of the Parental Education Programme (PEP) at national level was also identified as one of the AMP priorities for 2020. Following the 2019 evaluation of the PEP programme, UNICEF established a partnership with the World Bank to combine the existing cash transfer programme benefitting more than 2500 families with parenting education activities. Beyond its immediate impact on caregivers knowledge and practices, the programme aims at strengthening outreach capacities of social workers and management of cases of violence and abuse against children. PEP is also part of the Joint Programme financed by SDG fund and is building solid foundations for cross-sectoral and integrated programming with involvement of health, education, social protection sectors. In 2020, 150 frontline workers from the different programmes were capacitated in delivering PEP content to vulnerable caregivers as part of their service provision.

The third AMP priority referred to MICS6 which was successfully finalized, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. In absence of national census and DHS, MICS6 represents the most important set of data on the situation of children and women and will be essential to influence national
priorities in promotion of children's rights. With the agreement of the government the ongoing UNDAF 2017-2021 has been extended for an additional year before the preparation of the new Cooperation Framework. MICS6 data will be used to inform the Common Country Assessment and to track progresses towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In addition to MICS6, UNICEF collaborated with the government and civil society to produce other types of evidence. As part of its partnership with the national federation of NGOs (FONG) UNICEF is carrying out an analysis of child friendly public expenditure. This document will be used to influence state budget allocation in the coming years. In the meantime, data made available by INE shows an increase in state budget allocation to social protection from 1.5% in 2014 to 3.1% in 2020. UNICEF believes this is the result of extended advocacy in collaboration with WB and other stakeholders and linked to the implementation of the UNICEF supported Social Protection Policy. Thanks to UNICEF advocacy as well as technical and financial support and in collaboration with the World Bank, the Second National Council for Social Protection was organized and created the opportunity to discuss the need to update the Social Protection policy to take into account the existing challenges posed by the pandemic to social protection system as well as the new initiatives being implemented (social registry, cash transfer programme, parental education programme etc).

In the area of Child Protection (linked to KRC5), the CO continued to support capacity building of the sector's stakeholders in the aim to strengthen the child protection system, following the adoption of the child protection law and the revision of the National Family Law. According to MICS6 data, the incidence of violence against children has increased from 80% in 2014 to 83.5% in 2019. The pandemic is believed to have affected protection and reporting mechanism and exacerbated domestic violence, especially against children and women. In the past years, UNICEF invested massively in capacity building of national social workers through the Direction of Social Protection, Solidarity and Family (DPSSF). 92 frontline workers in the area of social services have been trained on protection of children at risk, psychosocial support and data management based on tools developed by UNICEF and aimed at systematizing data collection with the objective to establish a data culture. Additionally, with support from Allianz, ICT material was provided to improve working conditions at central and district level and play materials were provided to equip DPSSF centers at district level with child friendly spaces linked to counselling services. UNICEF stood up to support DPSSF to conduct a situation analysis of most vulnerable children in order to provide emergency support to contain the impact of the pandemic. The Child Protection Programme worked closely with the Communication Programme on the development of child protection C4D materials on positive parenting, psychosocial support for children and caregivers, and prevention of domestic violence. Considering the worrisome increase of rate of violence against children, UNICEF organized a high level advocacy event with Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Services Ministry of Justice, General Attorney and RCO to discuss and agree on systemic improvements and sector coordination in response to the surge of cases. To palliate to the lack of skilled social workers and the financial barriers for the expansion of social workforce, UNICEF kickstarted a new initiative engaging young interns in support to social services.

In the area of education (KRC3), the implementation of the Education Policy Chart was affected by the consequences of COVID19. Nevertheless, UNICEF was able to provide swift technical support for
the development of the education contingency plan and to ensure access to the GPE Accelerated funds. To guarantee the continuity of learning during the school closing period, the Government, with the financial and technical support from UNICEF and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), implemented 3 modalities of distance learning on an experimental basis thus, reaching approximately 70% of pre-school, basic and secondary education students. In order to respond to the needs of most vulnerable children, UNICEF designed a back to school incentive package aiming at reaching 6000 children belonging to 11% most vulnerable families at national level. Additionally, to support distance learning, UNICEF purchased 1000 solar radios to contribute to the promotion of alternative learning via radio. From a system building perspective and with regards to CPD related results, the latest MICS6 data shows important improvements in the reduction of OOSC children (in support to KRC3). In fact, the percentage of secondary school aged children out of school has been reduced from 11.6% (MICS5) to 6.5% (MICS6). In the area of Early Childhood Development, progresses have also been registered with an increase of ECD index from 54.4% (MICS5) to 62.9% (MICS6). This important result might relate to the parenting education programme supported by UNICEF since 2016. Finally, MICS6 is reporting important improvements with regards to percentage of children attending formal preschool which an increase from 52.8% in 2014 to 74.1% in 2019. On the other side, MICS6 is showing important gaps in terms of quality learning. While UNICEF is not directly supporting training of primary teachers, the country office has invested in promoting quality learning environment through the piloting of school’s self-assessment since 2019. Throughout 2020, UNICEF continued to foster dialogue around education system strengthening with a special focus on early learning and preschool education, through the BELDS initiative. UNICEF remains the most important partner of Ministry of Education in support of the inclusive education agenda: in 2020, following extensive advocacy and technical support by UNICEF, the law on special education continues to foster dialogue around education system strengthening with a special focus on early learning and preschool education, through the BELDS initiative. UNICEF remains the most important partner of Ministry of Education in support of the inclusive education agenda: in 2020, following extensive advocacy and technical support by UNICEF, the law on special education framework for STP was approved by the National Assembly. This was an important milestone to prioritize equitable access to education by disabled children which is now mandatory.

**Adolescent Development and Participation** continued to be an important programme component for UNICEF in 2020. Despite the impact of COVID19 on community mobilization, UNICEF has collaborated with the Youth Institute (IJ) to deliver life skills programmes in order to support positive, enabling behaviors among adolescents and youth and contribute to human capacity strengthening. Additional 500 young people were trained in life skills making the total of 1500 adolescents since the beginning of the CPD. Accordingly, to recently released MICS6 data, the rate of teenage pregnancy has dropped from 27.3% to 21.9%. Additionally, thanks to the intensively advocacy made by UNICEF in collaboration with GPE and the World Bank, an important equity issue was lifted since the decree banning pregnant girls from continuing their studies during the day has been removed. Unfortunately, and despite the important efforts deployed by UNICEF to reduce alcohol abuse among young people, MICS6 data show slow decrease in the percentage of 15-19 years old boys and girls who consumed alcohol before their 15th birthday (10.2% for girls and 18.5% for boys). Equally, in the area of HIV/AIDS prevention more efforts remain to be done as MICS6 data shows a decrease in the percentage of girls and boys with comprehensive knowledge about HIV/AIDS. With regards to out of school adolescents and young people, UNICEF with support from Portuguese Natcom and Allianz Portugal, provided technical and financial support to rehabilitate and equip 7 additional Youth Interaction Centers in 6 districts. While a structured non formal education programme is not yet available at national level, the youth interaction centers operate as convening and learning spaces for adolescents, especially the most vulnerable. In order to support the COVID19 response, UNICEF accompanied the Government in the elaboration of the Youth Action Plan to prevent COVID 19. Youth Interaction Centers were used as spaces to pass information to young people on how to prevent COVID19 and 1400 youth were mobilized to support RCCE activities as part of UNICEF contribution to COVID19 response. UNICEF in partnership with UNDP supported national adaptation of Generation Unlimited Youth Challenge which engaged about 500 adolescents and youth to address the issues of early pregnancy and environment. With support from WCARO, the country office finalized the investment case for girls which was used to successfully fundraise through the MPTF modality. The preparatory
process for the implementation of U report in Sao Tome and Principe started in 2020 and the launch of the platform is expected to happen in early 2021. Finally, UNICEF engage their first National Ambassadors, the music duo CALEMA, in support to the adolescent and youth agenda.

COVID19 pandemic disrupted the attention from a series of urgent issues potentially affecting children including environmental sustainability, increased urbanization and growing inequities.

In 2020, Sao Tome and Principe entered Universal Periodic Review and prepared a report on the status of human rights in the country. Particular attention was given to children's rights, in line with the 5th and 6th report on the implementation of CRC finalized in 2018 and expected to be presented to the CRC Committee in 2021.
Throughout 2020, UNICEF in STP played a critical role within UNCT through advocacy, strategic positioning of children’s agenda during the pandemic and joint programming. In April 2020 UNICEF lead the process of developing the United Nations COVID-19 response plan and in collaboration with WHO provided technical support for the development of an RCCE plan at national level. Throughout the most acute phases of the response (from April to August 2020), UNICEF collaborated with the UN system to ensure continuation of essential services for children and most vulnerable populations in line with the principle of leaving no one behind.

The COVID-19 pandemic created opportunities for new partnerships in support of the WASH agenda with a special attention to WASH in schools. UNICEF country office initiated its first collaboration with French Development Agency (AFD) for the construction of handwashing infrastructures in schools at national level.

UNICEF collaboration with UNDP, WHO and ILO in the area of Social Protection continued to be strengthened through the delivery of the Joint Programme financed by the SDG fund under the coordination of the Resident Coordinator Office. The Joint programme on social protection aims at establishing a national social registry connected with parenting programme as well as to health system data management (DHIS2). In order to support the expansion of the National Parenting Programme, UNICEF and WB joined forces for the scaling up of parenting services linked to the existing cash transfer programme, as an essential complementary measure meant to support early childhood development and vulnerable caregivers. It represents a high value strategic partnership around human capital and it has important potential for future cooperation.

Additionally, in collaboration with UNDP and ILO, UNICEF received funds through MPTF for the support to young girls out of school through the establishment of mentoring and support services.

UNICEF committed to the empowerment of adolescents and young people as part of the UNDAF Social Cohesion pillar together with UNFPA and UNDP. The country office maintained a strong partnership with the Ministry of Youth and support the launch of the Generation Unlimited Initiative, in close collaboration with UNDP.

UNICEF also partnered with the National Federation of Non-Governmental Organization (FONG) to support analysis of public budget expenditure for children and promote grassroots engagement of parents and teachers’ associations.

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the emergency represented an opportunity to further align advocacy and programme delivery towards the achievement of SDGs and the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations created a momentum to inform civil society of UN Reform at national level. The finalization of MICS6 represented an important milestone not only for UNICEF but for the entire UN System and development actors. The new data will allow to assess the results achieved in the implementation of the current UNDAF (2017-2021) and to prepare the common country analysis in view of the development of the new Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF). Finally, the Business Operations Strategy (BOS) was successfully finalized and submitted paving the way for reduction of costs and more efficiency.
Lessons Learned and Innovations

The pandemic was undoubtedly rich in lessons learned for UNICEF as well as for the United Nations System as a whole. The disruption of service delivery for a prolonged time, showed the fragility of the systems in place and the vulnerability of the country due to its isolation from the rest of the continent. The country has never been exposed to large scale emergency and all actors needed to join forces in record time to develop a preparedness and response plan which could anticipate the impact of COVID19 at a time when such impact was unknown at global level. One of the biggest challenges consisted in anticipating the consequences of the pandemic on sectors other than the health sector. For example, it was not possible to anticipate the rise of violence against children connected with the lockdown measure.

The main lesson learned is therefore the need to mainstream emergency preparedness into regular planning exercises both internally and with national partners.

The abrupt school closure requested UNICEF and partners to develop an alternative learning plan very quickly in order to reduce loss of learning opportunities by children and young people at all levels. The experience showed that alternatively learning options should not be limited to emergency situations but should be strengthened and provided as a complementary education offer which could benefit children out of school for reasons other than the pandemic. Surely, the pandemic created the opportunity to start a national dialogue around alternative service provision, mainly those based on virtual and technological platforms. It also unmasked the digital divide which affects Sao Tome and Principe and which should be object of a wider conversation including private sector, telecommunication companies, the government and development actors.

In the area of health, the disruption of vaccines provision was a clear example of the need to advocate for regional vaccines hubs to reduce both costs and procurement transactions as well as the risks of stock-out. The country's cold chain is not yet equipped with large stocking capacities and therefore it will not be possible to procure large amount of vaccines to ensure preparedness in case of needed.

The collaboration with UN agencies and the establishment of the Humanitarian Corridor greatly helped in containing the negative impact of the border closure. Considering the volatility of the global situation and the peculiar vulnerability of STP, it might be necessary to advocate for the reactivation of the humanitarian corridor for ad hoc support to humanitarian and development operations.

The flexible arrangements promoted by the organization both for staff wellbeing and funds reprogramming allowed UNICEF to be more agile in support to the pandemic response and to adjust its interventions accordingly. It was also encouraging to see partners and donors availability to discuss and reorient agreements to face the programmatic priorities posed by COVID19. The exchange of knowledge and learning with other countries, especially with lusophone countries, proved to be critical for the country office as well as national partners to learn real time on the best approaches to explore especially with regards to education, RCCE and C4D approaches in general.

Beyond COVID19, MICS6 process also brought a great deal of lessons learned linked to ownership building and partners coordination and it also confirmed the urgent need to leverage support for real time data generation to monitor the situation of children, women and other vulnerable groups. UNICEF will engage into a more comprehensive VAC study to analyze causes of the rise of violence, now that quantitative trends are available.

MICS6 data in the area of adolescent knowledge and practices confirm the need to integrate stronger monitoring component in the delivery of the life skills programme and to adjust the content of the programme accordingly to make sure results in the area of HIV/AIDS prevention and reduction of alcohol abuse are achieved.
Additionally, MICS6 data confirmed the need for UNICEF to join forces with the World Bank and other partners and align with KRC4. Considering the important achievements made in the reduction of out of school children, a programmatic refocus in support to quality learning outcomes and retention in upper secondary education, is now essential.

The launch of the internship programme in support to social services can be considered an innovation. The initiative has the double benefit of palliating the lack of human resources among the social workforce and to provide valuable professional experience to young boys and girls as they look for job opportunities.

The coming year 2021 will be critical to further analyse MICS6 data, develop a comprehensive and forward-looking situation analysis (SITAN) and engage in the development of the new Cooperation Framework as well as the new Country Programme which will start in 2023. The extension of the current country programme will be an opportunity to catch up on programmatic priorities which were delayed by COVID19 but also to collect additional qualitative information to inform nationa priorities.

Finally, in 2021 the country will organize its Presidential Elections. UNICEF in collaboration with the UN System will advocate for a peaceful process, and for a cohesive vision towards the reduction of inequities and promotion of children's rights.