Timor-Leste is a small island nation, and with restoration of its independence in 2002, it is one of the world’s youngest countries. With a total population of 1.3 million in 2020, over 70% living in rural areas, Timor-Leste has also one of the youngest populations in in Asia and the world: 44% of the total population is under 18 years old and 59% is below the age of 25. The 10–24-year-old age group accounts for one third of the population.[1]

Timor-Leste is considered a lower-middle-income country because of its GDP, but a Least Developed Country mainly due to its economic and environmental vulnerability.[2] The economy is highly dependent on oil, and thus vulnerable to instability in export prices. 42% of the population – and 48% of children – lives under the national poverty line,[3] with limited capacity to cope with shocks. The country is vulnerable to climate change and natural hazards, including strong winds, floods and landslides. In 2020, floods affected an estimated 32,000 people.

Despite impressive progress for children in the country’s short history, key challenges remain. Under-five mortality declined from 64 to 41 per 1,000 live births between 2009 and 2016,[4] but is still one of the highest in the region. The stunting rate among under-five children has also decreased, from 50% in 2013 to 47% in 2020,[5] but remains strikingly high, causing irreversible effects on early childhood development. Access to safe water and sanitation remains a critical issue, particularly in rural areas, where 30% of the population does not have access to at least basic water services, and 66% to at least basic sanitation facilities.[6]

Access to education has improved significantly, with the achievement of a primary net enrolment rate (NER) of 88% in 2019 (girls: 92%; boys: 84%), but less than 1 in 4 children are enrolled in preprimary education.[7] Ensuring quality of education is also a key challenge. Despite limited data, domestic violence is recognized as a widespread issue in Timor-Leste, affecting women and children who are both witnesses and victims.

Adolescents and youth face significant challenges, including lack of access to education and skills development outside of formal education, and few viable job prospects. They, and adolescent girls in particular, also have limited opportunities for civic engagement and participation, in a culture that tends to value elders and males. These opportunities came under threat of further restriction in 2020, as the Government drafted a law to criminalize defamation. The law was ultimately not presented for adoption, thanks to opposition from different quarters.

In 2020, the country grappled with political change, as well as with the COVID-19 pandemic. After the 2020 State budget was rejected twice in late 2019, the Government operated on a duodecimal budget for most of the year, with a newly formed Government coalition and turnover in key ministries in the first half of the year. In the second half of 2020, the political situation stabilized, and both the 2020 and 2021 State budgets were adopted, in October and in December respectively.

Against this backdrop, the country had its first case of COVID-19 in March 2020, and in view of its fragile health system, promptly closed its borders and schools, restricted freedom of movement, and enforced various prevention measures. This strategy proved effective, as only 44 cases were recorded in 2020, with no community transmission. However, children and their families were negatively affected, with skipped vaccinations, missed education, increased stress and risk of domestic violence and financial hardship. As per the UN Socio-Economic Impact Assessment, conducted in 5 municipalities in June/July 2020, 59% of households surveyed had lost their income due to the
COVID-19 crisis and 38% had experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in the previous month.

Over the course of the year, restrictive measures were gradually relaxed as the country achieved better preparedness. Schools started reopening from July, albeit with reduced learning time due to physical distance requirements. Still, access to Timor-Leste remained severely restricted, with no commercial flights and with land borders only opening every few weeks. This significantly complicated UNICEF’s operations throughout the year, as most supplies and many services are imported.

As a small island developing state, whose economy is highly reliant on oil and gas, Timor-Leste has been hard hit by the global economic slowdown, the closing of borders and internal measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. According to the World Bank, Timor-Leste’s GDP, at USD 2.018 billion in 2019, is forecast to contract by 6.8% in 2020, the sharpest fall since the country’s restoration of independence in 2002. Recovery is expected to be slow, with 3.1% GDP growth projected in 2021.

While the State’s response to COVID-19 was constrained by the lack of a 2020 budget, the Government opted to withdraw significant funds from Timor-Leste’s Petroleum Fund to respond to the pandemic and stimulate the economy. However, several delays were experienced to access these funds and development partners, including UNICEF, played a critical role in financing COVID-19 prevention and response efforts.

The UN as a whole played a critical role in responding to the heightened needs of children and their families, and in strengthening national systems for COVID-19 prevention, response and post-crisis recovery. While many development partners left the country at the onset of the crisis, UN personnel remained and found ways to function despite challenges, such as working from home with poor internet connection, the complexity of interacting with some ministries during the lockdown and extreme difficulties in procuring needed supplies.

[2] UN Committee for Development Policy (CDP), Expert Group Meeting on the Preparation of the Triennial Review of the List of Least Developed Countries (LDCs), 2021
[7] GOTL MOE EMIS

Major contributions and drivers of results
Child Survival and Development

In 2020, UNICEF continued its support to improving access to and utilization of health, nutrition and WASH services. Much attention focused on the COVID-19 response, including procurement services of essential medical equipment, personal protective equipment (PPE) and Infection and Prevention Control (IPC) supplies for health facilities, quarantine and isolation centers. 408 health workers (HWs) were trained on IPC and case management for COVID-19 suspected cases, while 65 HWs from four referral hospitals were trained on the management of antenatal, intrapartum and immediate postpartum care for pregnant women with COVID-19. Moreover, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health (MoH) to submit its application to the COVAX facility for COVID-19 vaccination roll-out in 2021.
With European Union (EU) funding, and working closely with MoH and the Primary Health Care (PHC) network, community access to nutrition services and information was enhanced. A total of 1,286 children suffering from Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) were reached with treatment (with a cure rate >80%), with 111,445 and 74,930 children received Vitamin A and deworming tablet respectively. Social and Behavior Change Communication interventions were expanded, including the establishment of Mother Support Groups in 126 villages, promoting positive practices in health, nutrition, WASH, and related gender equitable norms. The successful implementation of the 2020 Timor-Leste Food and Nutrition Survey (TLFNS) was a significant achievement, particularly in the context of COVID-19, and revealed steady improvement in key indicators since the 2013 TLFNS.

UNICEF continued its technical and financial support to the MoH and SAMES (the Central Pharmacy) to ensure availability of quality vaccines at all levels of the health system and contributed to zero stock-out of immunization supplies throughout 2020. While the pandemic disrupted the implementation of routine immunization services, deployment of a new immunization schedule, rapid convenience assessment (RCA) of immunization coverage in poorly performing health facilities and regular monitoring of immunization coverage through an online platform helped increase performance. As of 30 September 2020, 94% of children 12-23 months old were fully immunized.

Supporting Timor-Leste’s national Open Defecation Free (ODF) target, UNICEF initiated Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) in three municipalities, helping trigger 369 communities, with 44 subsequently becoming ODF certified, with access to non-shared toilets and in-house handwashing. Four new and upgraded rural water systems benefited 2,317 people in 2 municipalities, with UNICEF support. Increased attention on hand hygiene, in the context of COVID-19, led to upgrading WASH at public places and institutions, including 10 critical border locations and 189 public places, contributing to 75,600 persons being able to maintain personal hygiene. This infrastructure fully considered gender and disability issues, in partnership with UN Women and the Timor-Leste Disability Association.

UNICEF also supported health, nutrition and WASH advocacy and coordination to foster an enabling environment. Through UNICEF support, Timor-Leste was admitted to the Scaling-Up Nutrition (SUN) movement, committing to a world free from malnutrition by 2030. UNICEF and other partners assisted MoH to develop a COVID-19 vaccine deployment plan, resulting in the Prime Minister endorsing the inter-ministerial COVID-19 Vaccine Coordination Committee.

UNICEF also facilitated Timor-Leste’s first WASH Sector Bottleneck Analysis as well as participation in Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) Finance Ministers’ Virtual Meeting and virtual hand hygiene conference. Advocacy and community-based events related to Global Handwashing Day helped refresh COVID-19 related protocols and behaviors. Moreover, to initiate national capacity building on climate change resilience, UNICEF, in consultation with the National Designated Authority for GCF and water supply authorities, initiated a proposal to the Green Climate Fund to integrate climate change readiness in water resources management.

**Quality Education**

UNICEF continued to provide strong technical leadership to the education sector, and in 2020 largely focused on responding to the impact of COVID-19 on continuity of safe learning for all students.

In early March, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) launched a school-based campaign targeting 520 public, private and community preschools to raise awareness on actions to prevent COVID-19 cases. When schools closed in March, UNICEF collaborated with MoEYS to immediately introduce the distance learning program “Eskola ba Uma”, allowing children to continue learning through TV, radio, online devices and printed materials. The online Learning Passport platform was launched, providing access to all textbooks, video lessons, stories and songs.
learning materials were distributed for children in remote schools who did not have access to technology-based distance learning modalities. Moreover, UNICEF played a key knowledge brokering and partnership building role as it organized, with the MoEYS, the country’s First Conference and Exhibition on ICT and Innovation in Education.

UNICEF also played a leading role to facilitate the return to school. The Learning Passport was a critical tool, reaching 95 percent of the education workforce with online training on COVID-19 prevention. A ‘Back to School Campaign’ disseminated key messages through television, radio and print media, and community mobilization activities promoted collective efforts to bring all children back to school. In preparation for the reopening of schools, UNICEF provided 13,000 buckets with taps, and 239 basic education schools lacking access to regular water supply received water tanks with hand-washing stations and small grants to ensure water availability.

To ensure equity, materials on the Learning Passport include accessible e-books and resources available in several national languages. An e-book was developed for parents on how to talk to children with neurodevelopmental disabilities about COVID-19. Some story books were converted into audio format for visually impaired children and all Eskola ba Uma lessons and messages about COVID-19 on TV were provided in sign language. UNICEF collaborated with the Australia-funded Partnership for Human Development (PHD) to pilot the Child Functioning Screening tool in 50 schools to identify children experiencing functional difficulties in learning. UNICEF also participated in the review of the National Action Plan for Disabilities to ensure alignment with inclusive education priorities and supported the development of a school Reentry Policy, which upon approval will make it mandatory for schools to include pregnant girls and adolescent mothers.

UNICEF supported updating of the draft national, costed, multisectoral ECD policy to ensure consistency with international norms, standards and global developments. The ECD policy is expected to be approved in 2021. The Community Based Preschools Programme (CBPS) continued to be an effective approach for early childhood care and education, especially in remote areas, contributing to roughly 3–4 percent of total preschool enrolment in the country, with 3,251 children enrolled in 2020. Community engagement was strengthened through the development of CBPS Management guidelines, and training for School Management Committees helped strengthen local capacity to manage preschools.

UNICEF supported the school readiness initiative, engaging schools, children and their families to ensure a smooth transition to early primary grades, reaching a total of 1,431 students. Ten student councils were set up, building leadership and management capacities and offering citizenship education and knowledge on child rights and menstrual health and hygiene.

UNICEF, through the Spotlight Initiative on ending violence against women and girls, assisted MoEYS to revise the lower secondary curriculum to integrate 21st century skills, violence prevention and gender equality through a consultative process at national and municipal levels. Through partnerships with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Brazil’s INSPER University, new courses for adolescents are being developed to build skills such as problem solving, financial literacy, and coding. Adolescents and youth themselves are participating in developing the material.

Child Protection and Participation

In 2020, UNICEF continued to help strengthen the child protection system. To ensure every child can access child protection services, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion (MSSI) to developing and implement a comprehensive training on implementation of the Child and Family Welfare Policy. To date, 68 Social Welfare Workforce (SWW) actors were trained at national and municipality level, a mapping on the SWW and social services was developed and a SWW National Action Plan was drafted and is undergoing a validation process.
UNICEF continued to support a parenting education programme in two municipalities, to encourage positive child-rearing practices, including fathers’ involvement. In 2020, 428 community sessions were conducted in Ermera and Viqueque municipalities, benefiting 4,822 parents and caregivers (F: 3,134; M: 1,688) and their 9,644 children. A knowledge, attitude and practices survey is underway to assess the effects of the programme.

UNICEF also contributed to strengthening the birth registration system. 744 community leaders and midwives were trained to facilitate the registration of children’s births. The central civil registration database under the Ministry of Justice was upgraded, enabling timely upload and synchronization of civil registration data between municipality and national levels. A mobile birth registration campaign was launched, followed by socialization activities in communities, to prepare for community-level registration in 2021.

To support solution-finding by young people, UNICEF, UNDP and Plan International continued to partner for Generation Unlimited, with a bootcamp for 68 youth from various municipalities, 4 teams selected to develop solutions, and 2 teams joining the global competition. Adolescents and youth also took part in a workshop on innovation and co-design, organized by UNICEF and run by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where they, along with UNICEF, Government and CSO staff, co-designed solutions to increase birth registration, improve access to early childhood development, and fight malnutrition, among others. In addition, UNICEF supported a youth-led research project on internet use by adolescents and youth, with regular coaching to build youth’s capacity on research methods and ethical standards, and supported a youth platform that promotes civic action for internet safety and prevention of online violence, which expanded its reach to 5,500 Facebook followers in 2020.

To operationalize the decree law on open regime for children in detention, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Justice to draft regulations and procedures for implementation. Moreover, UNICEF and the Commission on the Rights of the Child jointly appealed to the President of Republic to release children in detention in the context of COVID-19, resulting in three children being released.

In light of increased child protection risks due to the pandemic, UNICEF supported MSSI’s capacity building on Child Protection in Emergencies, including GBV mitigation, and developed key messages on child protection and VAWG in the context of COVID-19. UNICEF also procured hygiene kits to 22 residential care facilities and safe houses including three prisons and procured a tablet for residential care facilities as well as some shelters to facilitate remote communication.

Recognizing the heavy toll of the pandemic on families’ well-being, UNICEF and the MoH established a dedicated hotline for mental health and psychosocial support. About 200 calls were received, including reporting of domestic violence cases, which were referred to appropriate services.

Social Policy and Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME)

In the context of COVID-19, established data collection channels were disrupted, and evidence was sorely needed to inform prevention, response and recovery efforts. UNICEF contributed to the UNDP-led Socio-Economic Impact Assessment (SEIA) of COVID-19, a survey conducted in 5 of the country’s 13 municipalities, which pointed to a fourfold increase in the number of vulnerable households with no income, including female-headed households, but also to sustained levels of social cohesion.

To fill an information gap, raise the voice of adolescents and youth, and establish a mechanism for future situation monitoring, UNICEF and the Commission for the Rights of the Child conducted an online survey of adolescents and youth. 407 adolescents and youth ages 10-24 (55% females; 7%
living with disabilities) responded, highlighting fear and sadness during the crisis, and higher stress levels for males than females. Returning to school was difficult for 40% of respondents, particularly for those outside Dili. Half of the respondents, and a higher share of males than females, reported having influenced their family’s use of the Government’s COVID-19 cash transfer. Close to half of respondents took action to help their community.

As the pandemic severely affected families’ income, the Government provided relief through a near-universal cash transfer, providing a one-off USD200 payment to over 300,000 households. The UN country team, including UNICEF, provided technical and financial support for the implementation. Over 300,000 brochures were distributed along with the cash, providing information on infant and young child feeding, handwashing and COVID-19 prevention. This cash transfer has helped build the case in Timor-Leste for both universal social protection and for cash plus interventions.

Recognizing the criticality of the 2021 State budget for a people-centered economic recovery, UNICEF provided support to the Prime Minister’s Office to review the budget from a results-based management and child rights perspective and developed a budget analysis focused on social sectors. This budget brief supported the Parliamentary budget debate, as well as UNICEF advocacy toward key decision-makers, as it was presented to the President of Timor-Leste, the Prime Minister and several ministers.

UNICEF, in collaboration with UNDP, continued to support the Government to move towards a Unique ID system, to improve State planning and decrease identity fraud for social benefits. UNICEF contributed to the development of a strategic plan for the initiative, through technical assistance on communication strategies. A major win was recorded in 2020 with the Government agreeing on a strategic implementation option and intending to use domestic resources for implementation.

To bolster evaluation and research in Timor-Leste, UNICEF has supported a country-led evaluation on sanitation (currently underway), has strengthened its internal quality assurance processes for research, and has initiated a discussion among UN agencies on building national mechanisms and capacity for ethical research involving human subjects.

Communications

UNICEF continued its strong advocacy on child rights in 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic bringing opportunities to expand the scope of UNICEF’s work, enrich partnerships, and try different approaches. UNICEF drove the coordination of national risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) for the COVID-19 response, including helping set up coordination mechanisms, developing a national strategy and co-leading with the MoH. Thanks to all partners’ efforts, close to 95% of the population was reached with COVID-19 prevention and other messaging. UNICEF also innovated by making available messages in sign language and braille, in partnership with Timor-Leste Disability Association.

UNICEF advocated for protection of children during the state of emergency and school closures, the non-usage of schools as holding or isolation centers for COVID-19 patients, and the continuation of services by government and partners and uptake of these services by communities. UNICEF worked with the Commission for the Rights of the Child and the Civil Society Child Rights Advocacy Network, which highlighted issues on child labour, birth registration, and child protection during the year. Moreover, UNICEF’s online engagement during the 16 Days of Activism against GBV brought a number of organization and personalities together for this common goal.

In 2020, UNICEF worked closely with policy and decision makers, opinion leaders, a UNICEF Youth Advocate and children to emphasize the importance of child rights and raise awareness on protection from COVID-19. The President of Parliamentary Commission F (responsible for child rights) and
Ministers of State Administration, Foreign Affairs and Health spoke on the need for child protection, access to health and other services, breastfeeding and handwashing and COVID-19 prevention. In total, 28 influencers advocated for action by individuals and communities to protect themselves and prevent the spread of COVID-19.

**UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships**

**Programmatic partnerships for vulnerable groups**

Partnerships were instrumental in increasing access to and quality of programme activities, especially for reaching vulnerable groups. Partnerships with the Timor-Leste Disability Association (ADTL) and the Blind Association in Timor-Leste ensured critical prevention messages were accessible to persons with disabilities. Additionally, ADTL provided inputs on the WASH COVID-19 response, helping improve infrastructure designs and ensure WASH activities and facilities were disability-friendly. In public markets, UNICEF partnered with UN Women, under the Safe Cities initiative, to incorporate gender considerations into UNICEF WASH interventions.

Collaboration with the Australia-financed Partnership for Human Development and Plan International have been beneficial for UNICEF’s work on Inclusive Education and Comprehensive School Safety and disaster risk reduction, respectively. UNICEF also engaged Youth Parliament Alumni and the Timor-Leste Red Cross for training student council members on citizenship education, knowledge on child rights, and strengthen young people’s leadership and management capacities.

**Evidence generation**

UNICEF Timor-Leste continued to expand its partnerships with academia, generating evidence for improved programming and advocacy. A partnership was established with the University of Western Australia to analyze longitudinal nutrition data for a clearer understanding of factors behind chronic and acute malnutrition in children’s earliest years. Together with WHO, UNICEF partnered with Sydney University for a study on Indirect Financial Barriers to access to Health services, with the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL) leading data collection.

The University of Waikato in New Zealand has provided ongoing technical guidance, mentoring and innovative teaching strategies for professional development of community preschool facilitators, bringing evidence and experience to the design and monitoring of UNICEF-supported early child education initiatives.

Finally, UNICEF continued its collaboration with Queens University Belfast and UNTL, as part of a global research on ECD and social cohesion. UNICEF also recruited a UNTL professor for coaching and quality assurance on a youth-led research project focused on internet use in the 10-24 age group.

**UN collaborative mechanisms**


2020 saw the launch of the Spotlight Initiative, an EU-UN partnership to end violence against women and girls (VAWG), implemented by 5 UN agencies and 2 supporting agencies, and led by the Resident Coordinator. Joint development and implementation of the programme addresses VAWG issues from diverse angles and through different entry points and levels. The expertise and strengths of each
agency are harnessed by the entire UN family, and the long-established partnerships that each agency has with line ministries are utilized by the entire Spotlight team.

As part of a joint UN project on disabilities, UNICEF is working with WHO, UN Women, UN Human Rights Adviser’s Unit, and UNFPA to improve access to quality services for persons with disabilities, particularly children and women. Strong collaboration was also recorded with UNDP on Unique ID and ICT education, and with several agencies through disaster preparedness planning and preposition of relief supplies led by the Resident Coordinator Office.

**Lessons Learned and Innovations**

2020 was a challenging year for regular programme implementation. However, challenges encouraged out-of-the-box thinking, which resulted in several innovations in UNICEF’s operations and service delivery for children and families.

As the pandemic dramatically changed the operating environment, with the closure of schools and more generally with restrictions on face-to-face interactions, it also created opportunities to re-imagine service delivery. Eskola ba Uma is a case in point: over a short amount of time, UNICEF developed online learning materials, brought together the three telephone companies to support dissemination of learning content, and initiated online training for teachers. There were obstacles to do this in a country like Timor-Leste, including its low digital literacy, limited internet penetration and no optic fiber. An attempt to push this prior to the crisis would likely have faced resistance. But the crisis helped UNICEF and partners push for the ‘impossible,’ and in turn this success inspired others to picture ‘what could be’ in other areas.

More generally, the crisis has compelled all stakeholders to consider the potential of technology for programme implementation, in a country with a multitude of remote villages and where the frequency of disasters is likely to grow due to impact of climate change. In the child protection sector, UNICEF provided tablets to residential care institutions, to facilitate information exchange and access to remote support. Another illustration is the support UNICEF provided to the Ministry of Health to regularly monitor immunization coverage using an online platform, which helped identify poor performers and plan outreach activities during COVID-19. The Google platform data collection tools developed for immunization has been considered a good practice, and the MoH has adopted it more broadly for maternal and child health data collection and reporting. UNICEF also conducted its first online survey, using KoBoToolbox, to fill an information gap on the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents and youth. The 400 responses gathered (55% from female respondents) showed that within the space of a few years, online surveys have become a viable means of collecting data, which opens up opportunities for direct engagement with adolescents and youth.

The crisis also exposed systemic weaknesses that had previously received limited attention, which has in turn helped build political will for action. The preparation of the Government’s COVID-19 cash transfer, for instance, was slowed down by poor population data. This in turn helped build momentum for implementing the transformative Unique ID initiative, which would improve identity management and facilitate State planning, as well as for strengthening civil registration and vital statistics. Similarly, the crisis helped focus attention on some of the long-standing gaps in the WASH sector and led to upgrading and improving WASH in health care facilities and in schools, as well as in critical locations such as points of entry and markets. While these needs have long been evident, they were routinely underfunded due to budget constraints. This also provided an opportunity to build toilets that consider gender and disability issues, and to design innovative, child-friendly handwashing stations.

A major challenge to a rapid and strong response to the pandemic were delays in procurement of
critical COVID-19 medical supplies – personal protective equipment, oxygen concentrators, and ventilators. Transporting these emergency supplies to Timor-Leste, given the huge global demand and logistics challenges, took several months. This experience points to the need to preposition supplies, which the Country Office undertook in late 2020, in consultation with UN and NGO partners. Such health, WASH and education supplies will help UNICEF respond quickly to crises, whose frequency and severity is expected to increase due to climate change. Looking forward, small, isolated countries like Timor-Leste might benefit from global UNICEF measures such as decentralized procurement and logistics to the regional and even sub regional level.

In a year of unprecedented challenges, the dedication and flexibility of UNICEF staff was a critical success factor in 2020. While working from home was the norm for part of the year, many UNICEF staff, as secondary frontliners, continued to participate in essential face-to-face meetings and support Government activities on-site. Some staff were caught outside the country due to the borders closing and had to telework from different time zones and the Country Office had to re-purpose some staff who were in-country to fill critical needs. Solidarity also played out as the Country Office integrated youth volunteers. The office found new ways to maintain a strong sense of solidarity, with weekly all staff Zoom meeting and an office wide Whatsapp group.

However, this special situation took a human toll, and stress levels were high in 2020. The difficulty of securing medevac and visa arrangements, for COVID-19 or other critical medical care, remained a key concern throughout the year. To allay staff fears, the UNCT established a UN wellness centre, staffed with medical personnel, and staff were encouraged to avail themselves of psychological support services. Staff is UNICEF’s greatest asset, and the organization will continue all efforts to ensure staff safety and well-being.