Update on the context and situation of children

On Friday 13 March, just two weeks after the new Government took office, the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Uruguay. The Executive Branch declared a national health emergency, taking measures such as closing borders to tourism, suspending public events, suspending face-to-face classes and encouraging remote working. The Government also postponed the departmental elections – which were due to take place in May – until the end of September. The new departmental authorities took office in December.

The Government has achieved a high level of testing and tracking capacity. The strategy worked well. As at 17 November, there had been a total of 4,208 confirmed cases and 68 deaths and the test positivity rate was around 2 per cent. However, by 31st of December, confirmed cases had risen to 19,119 and the test positivity rate was 8.5%.

The country was relatively well prepared to tackle the socioeconomic impacts of the crisis. In 2019, monetary poverty was at 8.8 per cent and unemployment was at 8.9 per cent. Almost the entire population had access to health services and social protection systems were able to expand rapidly. In any case, given the magnitude of the crisis, it was inevitable that the impacts would also be felt in Uruguay.

In January–September 2020, gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 6.7 per cent compared with the same period in 2019. According to official estimates, 120,000 jobs were lost between February and April. This situation subsequently improved, but in October there were still 45,000 fewer jobs than in February and the unemployment rate stood at 11.2 per cent. Recovery in employment differed for men and women: while the October employment rate for men was 0.6 percentage points below the February level, for women this difference was 2.8 percentage points.

In addition to expanding existing cash transfer programmes, the Government implemented new programmes to cover people who did not have access to any formal social security protection. According to surveys conducted by UNICEF, in July, 13 per cent of households with children cited state support as one of their main three sources of income, which was twice pre-pandemic levels. In September, data collected by UNICEF show that these policies were directed at the right people, with 80 per cent of households at low socioeconomic levels receiving state support, which also increased. However, despite the measures, some 35,500 children and adolescents may have fallen into poverty during the second quarter of 2020, which can hamper efforts to achieve SDG 1. This may have caused monetary poverty in the 0–18 years age group to exceed 19 per cent in 2020 for the first time since 2013, representing an increase of 3 percentage points compared with 2019. Furthermore, poverty among children and adolescents may have risen to 23 per cent in the departments on the border with Brazil, 24 per cent in single-parent households headed by women, and 31 per cent in households of African descent. In all cases, the increase in poverty is higher than the estimated average for the country putting the achievement of SDG 10 at stake.

The successful handling of the pandemic allowed Uruguay to be one of the first countries in the world to resume face-to-face classes. However, a survey by the Administración Nacional de Educación Pública [Uruguay’s National Public Education Authority – ANEP] indicated that the gap in the education system widened during the period without face-to-face teaching. The situation is particularly worrying in high school. While 61 per cent of students at public high schools in the least socially vulnerable areas participated in educational activities, only 28 per cent of those at high schools in the most disadvantaged areas did so. In the same vein, the pandemic increased the educational gap
between students in the public and private systems. According to a survey conducted by UNICEF and UN-Women in April[1], the average number of hours spent on primary school homework had increased by 67 per cent among children attending private institutions, compared with 28 per cent among those at public schools.

Regarding health, administrative data from the Ministry of Public Health show that, despite attendance restrictions, 274,491 vaccine doses were administered to children in the first half of 2020 - equivalent to 87% of the number of doses administered during the same period in 2019. UNICEF’s September survey showed that about 20 per cent of children and adolescents became ill during the pandemic and a doctor was consulted at least once in 75 per cent of those cases.

Although the year has been marked by the response to COVID-19, there were other milestones worth noting. The planning process for the 2021–2025 Cooperation Programme was successfully completed, under the coordination of the Agencia Uruguaya de Cooperación Internacional [Uruguayan Agency for International Cooperation – AUCI] and with the participation of the private sector and civil society. At the same time, planning for the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) was carried out in conjunction with the United Nations system and under the leadership of the Resident Coordinator’s Office. As part of this process, Uruguay’s President held a meeting with the highest authorities of the agencies in Uruguay to discuss the Government’s priorities.

UNICEF made significant advocacy efforts on certain legislation initiatives. Firstly, in response to an urgent bill promoted by the Government coalition containing regressive proposals on juvenile justice, UNICEF advocated with the political system to make the final version of the law less harsh, as was publicly acknowledged.[2] Secondly, UNICEF carried out a strong advocacy campaign in conjunction with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) to promote, among decision makers, the proper implementation of the Presidential Decree on food labelling – a key measure for the effective prevention of obesity and overweight and of non-communicable diseases in children and adolescents, a measure vital to attaining SDG 2. However, the Decree was adopted on 1 February 2021 with modifications. UNICEF is assessing the impact on children’s health.


**Major contributions and drivers of results**

In 2020, the Country Office faced the challenges of drawing up the Cooperation Programme with a new government, ensuring compliance with the results of the current programme and adjusting the year’s programming based on the needs of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNICEF prioritized the response to the pandemic across all programming areas, seeking to respond to children’s immediate needs with a holistic and human rights-based approach, while at the same time finishing the implementation of the current Cooperation cycle. UNICEF developed cross-sectoral and multisectoral programming, adhering to the strategy, ‘Programming for at-scale results for children’.

In addition to carrying out the Situation Analysis (SitAn), UNICEF conducted a study in conjunction with AUCI on the value of UNICEF in the country and organized three meetings to discuss the new
programme with the authorities, civil society and representatives of the private sector. With the support of the Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office (LACRO), UNICEF drew up three strategic papers and conducted a Gender Programme Review that was used to analyse and define new programme priorities. The process to prepare and approve the Country Programme Management Plan (CPMP) was completed and the Country Programme Document (CPD) was submitted to Headquarters to be presented to the Executive Board in February 2021. UNICEF’s programme priorities are in turn aligned with the priorities of the new UNSDCF 2021–2025. During the CPD process, UNICEF took into consideration the recommendations to Uruguay by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the CEDAW Committee, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Universal Periodic Review.

Despite the challenges that COVID-19 brought, the Country Office continued efforts to improve internal effectiveness and efficiency. Internal governance and management were strengthened by consolidating key operational functions and implementing new systems (e.g., eGRC, DocuSign, MAsset). LACRO supported the Office to conduct a Peer Review in July 2020 and to conduct Business for Results (B4R) training. The Office also benefited from several virtual learning initiatives to strengthen staff capacity, including leadership skills. The Office also took initial steps in the implementation of the PSEA policy. Lastly, with regard to its knowledge and information systems, the Office improved its IT infrastructure to ensure full compliance with UNICEF standards. The implementation of the ECM project concluded in 2020 and proved essential to ensure continuity of business during the emergency.

Support a High-Income Country in its humanitarian response to COVID-19: how to sustain a resilient system

Generation and disclosure of evidence (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 10/UNDAF 3.1 /SP Goal Area 5)
UNICEF has been monitoring the situation of children and their families to help mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. This was done through online surveys, telephone surveys and microsimulations. The online surveys made it possible to obtain a quick overview of families’ knowledge of COVID-19 and its initial impacts on the coexistence and well-being of children and adolescents. Four such surveys were conducted: two aimed at adults with dependent children, one aimed at adolescents and one aimed at women who had been pregnant during the pandemic. These surveys show, for example, that cohabitation was more difficult (for instance, 18 per cent of people reported having increased punishments to children) and that there were changes in the behaviour of children and adolescents (56 per cent of cases reported mood changes in their children), but there was also a high level of awareness of prevention measures. Telephone surveys with random sampling provide data that are representative of the national situation. The first of these surveys was carried out at the end of April in conjunction with UN-Women and showed a high level of compliance with voluntary isolation and the greater burden of care that fell on women. In July, a survey coordinated by LACRO was carried out, which showed that the socioeconomic situation had deteriorated, but not as severely as in other countries in the region. In October, a survey focusing on social policies, food and health was carried out, which showed that social policies were focused appropriately but that there were warning signs in access to food and health checks. Finally, UNICEF commissioned the Instituto de Economía [Institute of Economics] to conduct a microsimulation of the impact of the crisis on child poverty levels, which showed that children and adolescents in poverty could return to 2013 levels, with increased vulnerability for those who live on the border with Brazil, are of African descent or belong to female-headed households. This information, together with discussions with national authorities, the National Emergency System and civil society, defined the actions set out in UNICEF’s humanitarian response plan.

As well as producing evidence of the impact of the pandemic on children and using the ‘Power of evidence as a driver of change for children’, UNICEF provided personal protective equipment (PPE) for health and care staff, hygiene kits and other items such as cribs and blankets and educational kits.
for more than 3,000 extremely vulnerable families.  
Below we highlight some of the other response actions UNICEF took.

**Resilience model (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 10, 16 /UNDAF 2.2, 2.3 /SP Goal Areas 1, 5)**

UNICEF supported the department of Canelones, the second most populated department (after Montevideo), in designing a resilience model to later be scaled up both nationally and for other departments. The model was aimed at preventing the economic and social impacts of the pandemic on the families most susceptible to poverty, and at mitigating the effects of lockdown on children’s physical and emotional health. To this end, UNICEF worked with the department (which with UNICEF support, launched in 2007 the early childhood model inspired by the Chilean version and which later became national policy) on three strategic lines: support for the design and implementation of a monthly transfer equivalent to US$35 to approximately 4,000 families identified by the department as very vulnerable, with low income and with pregnant women and children aged 0–4 years; a messenger service to these families with content (podcasts and videos) on health care, nutrition and parenting skills; and the launch of a telephone advice service for families with children (aged between 0 and 4). Furthermore, as a new service, the implementation of the project allowed for the testing of a telephone tool designed by LACRO that allows situations of risk and violence towards children and adolescents to be detected and generates support and referral actions depending on the seriousness of the situation. A partnership between the Latin American development bank CAF and UNICEF was built around this model, whereby CAF will be responsible for the financial continuity of the project.

**Parenting tips and tools for families with children and adolescents (SDGs 3, 5 /UNDAF 3.5 /SP Goal Area 3)**

UNICEF designed and implemented risk prevention communication campaigns and messages with tools to support families during the pandemic. As part of this strategy, a coronavirus-specific section was created on the UNICEF website. Within this framework, UNICEF developed and disseminated five guides. More importantly, UNICEF’s materials were incorporated in the National Emergency System’s outreach materials to protect ‘vulnerable populations’. The production of materials for families was supported by social media live streams on different topics.

**Educational continuity (SDGs 4, 10 /UNDAF 2.2 /SP Goal Areas 2, 5)**

By 2019, Uruguay had virtually universal educational attendance (98 per cent on average) for children and adolescents aged 4–14. As part of the cooperation programme, UNICEF provided support to ANEP to identify students at risk of dropping out and to put in place tailored support.

From the age of 15 students become increasingly disengaged from education. In 2018, only 66.5 per cent of 17-year-olds in the lowest income quintile (and 62 per cent of those of African descent) attended an educational institution, compared with 98 per cent in the highest quintile. Many of these young people also find themselves in a lower grade than they should be for their age. Consequently, in 2019, only 43.3 per cent of young people aged between 21 and 23 had finished secondary school.

UNICEF advocated to reduce the number of children repeating years. This advocacy contributed to the approval of regulations by ANEP and an increase in the rate of students that finish secondary education on time, from 31.4 per cent in 2015 to 38.1 per cent 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic created new threats to educational continuity. With classes being suspended, ANEP designed strategies to provide online teaching, based on Plan Ceibal (one laptop per child) and the country’s high connectivity levels. Many teachers who did not previously use digital platforms were faced with the need to expand their digital knowledge very quickly. As such, UNICEF supported digital education for teacher trainers. In addition, UNICEF helped to produce the television series *Tiempo de Aprender* [Time to Learn], which broadcasted educational content for children and adolescents on public television.
UNICEF supported a model for first-year secondary school students at extreme risk of dropping out, which included an agreement featuring commitments by the student, the family and the school. UNICEF, in alliance with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) will evaluate the model.

Uruguay became an example for the region: authorities announced a voluntary, phased and gradual return to the classroom as early as one month after the start of the lockdown period. UNICEF systematized the experience: https://www.unicef.org/uruguay/en/reports/early-opening-schools-uruguay-during-covid-19-pandemic.

**Support to prevent, detect and address violence (SDG 16 / UNDAF 3.5 / SP Goal Area 3)**

With UNICEF support, case detection has increased from 800 children in 2011 to over 4,200 in October 2020. UNICEF has focused on supporting public policies to develop tools to detect and address situations of violence, thereby achieving the goal set out in the CPD. However, there are still many challenges to be addressed, such as: violent child rearing practices; male violence and its impact on children; and the need to continue strengthening services and policies to better respond to and redress the consequences of violence. During 2020, UNICEF made progress in generating data on gender-based violence and violence against children, which has helped put children on the public agenda as direct victims of intimate partner violence. This strategy will be strengthened during the next cooperation period.

UNICEF surveys indicate that in 2020, children and adolescents were more exposed to arguments, fights and punishment in their homes. UNICEF supported education authorities and adapted campaigns and disseminated material to raise awareness of the negative impact of abuse on children.

Uruguay is going through one of the biggest court cases in its history on the commercial exploitation of adolescent girls. In partnership with the National Committee against Sexual Exploitation, UNICEF re-launched the ‘No Excuses’ advocacy campaign, which was first launched in 2013. The campaign was viewed more than 15 million times and accumulated 63,000 interactions on social media.

**Children and adolescents in residential care institutions (SDGs 3, 10 / UNDAF 3.3 / SP Goal Area 3)**

Uruguay has one of the highest rates of children living in residential care institutions in the region. More than 4,000 children were living in homes run by the Instituto del Niño y Adolescente del Uruguay [Uruguay Institute for Children and Adolescents – INAU] at the start of the pandemic. School closures and restrictions that resulted in children and adolescents having a lack of contact with their families or emotional connections put them in a particularly vulnerable position.

In this context, UNICEF and the National Human Rights Institution implemented a remote monitoring system by creating a telephone tool with questions addressed to the directors of residential care institutions. This made it possible to monitor the implementation of health protocols, to understand how the children were coping with the lockdown and to insist on the need to ensure that the children had contact with their families. In recent years, UNICEF has contributed significantly to the consolidation of the National Human Rights Institution for monitoring the situation of children and adolescents who are deprived of their liberty.

To help improve the lockdown situation, UNICEF prepared and distributed socioeducational materials for 2,503 children and adolescents living in 123 residential care institutions, as well as guides with tools so that the centres’ teams could support the children through this potentially traumatic experience (‘Más allá de nuestra fragilidad’ [Beyond our Fragility]): https://www.unicef.org/uruguay/documentos/mas-alla-de-nuestra-fragilidad-guia-de-proteccion-para-ninos-y-ninas
Support for migrant families (SDGs 1, 2, 10, 17 / UNDAF 2.1/SP Goal Area 5)
The arrival of COVID-19 had a negative effect for many migrant families with children, informal workers and day labourers who were either dismissed from their jobs or who had recently arrived and had to wait to obtain their legal documents. In partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNICEF strengthened its support for the most vulnerable migrant families and helped to establish a system of direct care for migrant families with dependent children through assistance with accommodation payments, specialized psychological support for children, hygiene kits, educational materials and food vouchers.

Strengthening the child protection system (SDGs 5, 16 / UNDAF 3.3 / SP Goal Area 3)
As one of the outcomes for 2020, and in compliance with the target set in the current Cooperation Programme, UNICEF proposed that the protection system have tools to detect and address situations of violence, reduce the number of children living in institutions, and limit the deprivation of liberty of adolescents in conflict with the law. UNICEF was able to strengthen the capacities of the Sistema Integral de Atención a la Violencia [Comprehensive System to Address Violence] by designing several courses and materials such as: an online training session for those working in the protection system, in which almost 4,800 people were enrolled and which will inform trainings of the national early childhood programme ‘Uruguay crece contigo’ [Uruguay Grows with You] and the University of the Republic Postgraduate School of Paediatric; an online course for judges and defence lawyers; and an online course on sexual violence for prosecutors. UNICEF also supported the development of socioeducational software that will allow each child living in an institution to have an individualized protection and reparations plan, as well as a census of children living in institutions, which will allow INAU to have tools to discharge them. UNICEF continued to support the National Human Rights Institution to overcome the limitations imposed by the pandemic and to continue monitoring detention centres, residential care institutions and mental health clinics.

Fundraising (SDG 17)
The year 2020 was very good. In principle, the impact of the crisis on people’s employment and income represented a major risk in terms of fundraising. However, UNICEF identified opportunities to win support for the cause of children from the wider public that allowed its fundraising operations to continue to grow.

UNICEF continues to rank second worldwide in pledge donor penetration, after Iceland, which speaks to the great generosity of the Uruguayan people and their willingness to contribute to the country programme and humanitarian situations around the world.

In Latin America, despite the small population, Uruguay has the third highest number of individual partners (after Argentina and Brazil).

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

The United Nations

In 2020, UNICEF participated in four United Nations joint projects. At the time of writing, two of these projects have been funded. Together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women, IOM and PAHO, UNICEF will implement a project called ‘Reshaping market conditions and strategy to finance the transition to sustainable development in Uruguay’ (Component 1 of the Joint SDG Fund). The overall objective of this project is to harness the power of business and markets for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

In the second project, UNICEF, UN Women, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNDP will implement a proposal approved by the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund. In this case, the project has a significant geographical dimension, concentrating on the areas most affected by the pandemic: those around Uruguay’s capital (Montevideo) and on the border with Brazil. The proposed strategy involves improving information systems to reach vulnerable populations, adapting education and care policies to continue providing services and minimize epidemiological risks, and developing capacity and technical assistance on social policies for subnational governments.

Working together to minimize the impact of the pandemic on children
To minimize the impact of the pandemic on children, UNICEF formed many partnerships, including with the United Nations Resident Coordinator’s Office, IOM, UN Women, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), PAHO, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Public Health, ANEP, the Uruguayan Institute for Children and Adolescents – INAU, the University of the Republic, and several national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks and experts. Its partnership with the National Human Rights Institution was key to ensuring that the situation of children living in residential care institutions continued to be monitored during the voluntary lockdown.

Two partnerships were of particular importance. Firstly, UNICEF collaborated with the National Emergency System to include a child perspective in all national emergency preparedness plans and to prepare protocols for the protection of children and caregivers in detention centres and residential care institutions. The partnership was launched at a public event in the Presidency: https://www.presidencia.gub.uy/sala-de-medios/videos/presentacion-protocolos-sinae-inau-inisa-unicef-covid-19. Recognizing UNICEF as the specialized international organization on children’s issues, the National Emergency System has also included in its platform UNICEF tools and materials to guide families and children affected socially and emotionally by COVID-19: https://www.gub.uy/sistema-nacional-emergencias/comunicacion/publicaciones/covid-19-infancia.

Secondly, the Country Office partnered with Plan Ceibal to use its virtual educational platform to support learning continuity among children and adolescents at risk of dropping out and to provide training to teachers on detecting and tackling situations of violence and on how to use new information and communication technologies.

Finally, UNICEF also consolidated its alliance with CAF on early childhood issues and initiated conversations with IDB and the World Bank on education.

Lessons Learned and Innovations
The lessons learned by UNICEF in 2020 come from its experience of supporting the humanitarian response to the COVID-19 pandemic in a country that has been classified as high income since 2013 with a newly instated government, that enjoys strong institutions and an extensive social protection system (for example, 100 per cent health system coverage, unemployment insurance covering 75 per cent of workers, an existing cash transfer system that is ready for vertical and horizontal expansion) and that has wide-reaching high levels of internet connectivity.

**Applying the best interests of the child principle: the reopening of schools**

Uruguay exemplified this principle in the region, with remote learning models quickly put in place, the early reopening of its schools and the President’s decision, based on scientific evidence, to keep them open despite the growing number of infections and pressure from certain sectors to close them. The process of returning to school took place in an innovative, gradual and phased way. Unlike in other countries, the return was not staggered by grades, but considered other factors, such as population density, drop-out risk and the completion of educational cycles. However, and despite extraordinary efforts by the educational authorities, social distancing measures posed a challenge for the public education system. Indeed, while private schools have been able to guarantee children's daily attendance, this has been more difficult in public schools. At the same time, the most vulnerable children have experienced greater challenges in sustaining virtual educational activities because of difficulties with internet access and less support from parents who are not equipped to help them. Therefore, UNICEF and its partners face the challenge of working with the Government to overcome the inequities that were already in place before the pandemic, and which have been aggravated by COVID-19.

**Coordinating the efforts of international education partners: a priority in the years to come**

Led by UNICEF, a group of international partners working on education: UNESCO, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank, the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) and UNICEF) held a public event to launch a digital platform ([https://pecu.uy/](https://pecu.uy/)). This contains all the resources produced by the various organizations for the education community to access easily and is a precedent worth following in future joint initiatives.

**A lesson of resilience**

Given the country’s characteristics, UNICEF’s humanitarian response work was geared towards strengthening the resilience of both state institutions and families themselves. UNICEF encouraged and supported government partners responsible for public policies to anticipate risks and increase measures to overcome the impact of these disruptive events on the most vulnerable children.

The pandemic has shown that in a country such as Uruguay where the State’s social policies are well integrated and far-reaching, UNICEF’s work can be more valuable if it is directed towards strategies that go beyond the immediate response to the crisis and instead mitigate its consequences. Moreover, UNICEF’s contribution should be to improve the quality of those policies by using the latest tools and knowledge and to bring a child-sensitive perspective. One example of this type of action is the model currently active in the department of Canelones and already mentioned in this report. What started as a traditional cash transfer, UNICEF supplemented with a digital early childhood strategy that provides tools and quality information for parents. UNICEF also tested an innovative violence prevention and detection tool designed by LACRO that does not require a continuous presence. The effectiveness of this model will be evaluated for scaling-up purposes.

Uruguay’s high level of connectivity (88 per cent of households had internet in 2019)[1] greatly facilitated UNICEF’s work to support teachers, caregivers and families with children and to help mitigate the effects of the health crisis and increase their resilience. As such, UNICEF produced and disseminated information for families so that they would have the appropriate tools to best cope with the stress caused by the pandemic. In addition, UNICEF quickly adapted to virtual communication
methods, which enabled it to expand its capacity so that it could rapidly provide childhood professionals with the tools to facilitate their work in these extreme circumstances. This virtual system has facilitated the exchange between very busy international experts and many Uruguayans at a lower cost than in person.

Although UNICEF estimates that child monetary poverty will increase by three points, the effects of the pandemic on the lives, development and well-being of children and adolescents, and the impacts on their adult lives, are still unknown. Uruguay has the resources to mitigate these effects: the State and society both have systems that have allowed them to navigate difficult times, and to identify and aid those suffering the most. However, the pandemic is ongoing and there is a very high degree of uncertainty. Therefore, the lessons have not yet been wholly learned and UNICEF will continue systematizing Uruguay’s humanitarian response in 2021. This systematization should help develop knowledge on the mechanisms of Uruguay’s resilience and shed light on the added value of an agency such as UNICEF working in a high-income country that is facing unprecedented humanitarian demands.

**Conclusion**

No society is exempt from the negative effects of a crisis of this magnitude, but Uruguay has demonstrated how important social protection systems are for mitigating humanitarian disasters. Uruguay is also showing positive signs that children are a priority. It is not by chance that UNICEF has been able to assist in this emergency. However, as UNICEF cannot and should not do so alone, it has strengthened existing alliances and developed new ones with state institutions, civil society and international financial institutions. It will not be possible to respond to the medium- and long-term impacts of this pandemic unless we work with all the agencies of the United Nations. The new United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) has created an opportunity and UNICEF is committed to making it a reality.