Similar to other countries, the story of the year 2020 in Uzbekistan is dominated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which has almost extinguished the entire GDP growth in 2020 from the initial forecast of 5.7 percent in January. In the first half of 2020, GDP growth was nearly zero compared to a growth of 5.8 percent in the first half of 2019. The unemployment rate increased sharply from 9.4 percent in the first quarter of 2020 to 15 percent in the second quarter, before slightly decreasing to 11.1 percent at the end of the third quarter. Higher gold production and agriculture growth helped offset a sharp fall in industry and services. A cumulative increase of 17 percent in social payments and a 10 percent increase in minimum wages since February have helped preserve private consumption despite a 19 percent decline in remittances. Lower remittances and a wider trade deficit increased the current account deficit to 7.7 percent of GDP in the first half of 2020. Exports fell by 22.6 percent in the same period, due to supply chain disruptions and a fall in key commodity prices (natural gas, metals). Imports fell by 15 percent due to a sharp fall in machinery and capital imports. The fiscal deficit increased to 5 percent of GDP. About 2.5 percent of GDP was directed to support health, low-income allowances, public works, and enterprises. Annual GDP growth is projected to be between 0.4 and 0.8 percent in 2020. Assuming limited further lockdowns, GDP growth is projected to be between 4.8 and 5.0 percent in 2021[1].

COVID-19 has had the greatest impact on the most vulnerable populations, including persons with disabilities, the elderly, and persons living in institutions, such as orphanages and mental health facilities. According to the Listening to Citizens of Uzbekistan (L2CU) survey conducted in April, most respondents said that they were unable to meet their basic needs and had no savings. The number of those who said they could not afford food increased in April from less than 9 percent to over 12 percent of the population.[2] During the lockdown, education continued through distance learning programs, broadcasted through television and online portals followed by blended programs during October-December 2020 when preschools and schools were gradually opened adhering to safe school re-opening guidelines. The COVID response was planned, coordinated, and implemented within the global COVID HAC framework, with results reported through the global and regional sitreps.

UN Country Team signed a cooperation framework (UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) in September 2020 that articulates the UN’s collective response to supporting Uzbekistan to achieve the national SDGs with an emphasis on leaving no one behind. It takes into account the impacts of COVID-19 and identifies three strategic priorities and five outcomes which are fully aligned with national priorities, in order to support the Government in achieving the nationalized SDGs.

In addition to inaugurating the Parliamentary Ombudsman in 2020, Uzbekistan adopted two national strategies, policies and action plans aimed at addressing the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Mechanisms: formulation of the National Human Rights Strategy (2020) and the National Action Plan on Universal Periodic Review (2020). This will strengthen the human rights monitoring
On December 29, 2020, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev delivered the traditional year-end speech addressed to the Parliament, in which he outlined main policy priorities and targets most likely to have a significant positive effect for children in 2021 and beyond. To immediately put that into effect, the President announced 2021 as the Year of the Youth in Uzbekistan. The President committed to raise the coverage of the preschool education to 65 percent, carry out curricular reforms to meet international standards, provide motivation for teachers in remote schools, reform the vocational education system in accordance with the labor market needs; enact the Law on Children’s Ombudsperson; introduce a new system of special support for children from low-income families, children without parental care and those with disabilities; fully operationalize the Single Register on Social Protection; reduce anemia in pregnant women by 25 percent; improve the efficiency of public administration by reducing duplicate departments and increase e-governance services. Similarly, abolish duplicate courts and increase the power of the Ombudsman regarding investigating torture. In relation to gender, the President announced the creation of the Republican Women’s Council, which will promote the rights of the 17 million women in Uzbekistan [3]. This measure will further consolidate the ongoing reforms and provide a conducive environment for UNICEF to advocate for further improvements in the rights of women and girls in Uzbekistan.

At the international level, Uzbekistan continued to strengthen bilateral relations with key development partners. On October 1, the United States Government announced the launch of a bilateral U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) mission to Uzbekistan[4]; the EU delegation is currently developing the next EU-Uzbekistan Cooperation Framework; KOICA, JICA, Swiss Development Agency and others positioned to support the government’s wide-ranging programme of economic, political and social reforms while strengthening the private sector, non-governmental organizations and independent media. These bilateral cooperation open up more opportunities for leveraging partnerships and resources for children.


**Major contributions and drivers of results**

UNICEF’s work in 2020 primarily focused on providing technical assistance to the Government of Uzbekistan in attaining the results for the National Strategy of Action on five priority areas of development of Uzbekistan 2017–2021 focusing on improved governance and social development, health care, education, women empowerment and unlocking the potential of youth.
UNICEF worked with the Government and other partners to develop and implement national policies and programmes in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and UNICEF strategic priorities. The attainment of results was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and a necessity to urgently and effectively respond to the rapidly growing needs of the population, especially the vulnerable and marginalized groups. In this context, UNICEF chaired and co-chaired the UN-IFIs sub-task forces on Education, Social Protection and Data and Assessments within the Socio-Economic Response to the COVID-19 impact (SER). UNICEF presented the Analysis of the Situation of Children in Uzbekistan that became a key source for bringing children rights agenda to a high level as reflected in the address of the President to the Parliament in December 2020. In anticipation of the CRC Committee observations to the 5th State Party Report in 2021, the Presidential Resolution “On additional measures to improve the system for protecting the rights of the child” was adopted in May 2020 followed by the Programme on strengthening the protection of the rights, freedoms and legal interests of the child approved by the Government and both chambers of the Parliament on September 10, 2020.

**Goal area 1. Every Child Survives and Thrives**

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19 UNICEF contributed to the strengthening of the immunization supply chain and cold chain systems that include vaccine planning, forecast, budgeting, and procurement, construction of vaccine warehouse, procurement and installation of cold chain equipment and vehicles, develop an immunization information system and capacity allowing for safe storage of nine different types of vaccines for more than 750,000 children and maintain the coverage.

UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health (MOH) to introduce the second dose of Human Papillomavirus Vaccine among 10-year-old girls which reached 290,585 girls, a coverage of 97 percent even during the pandemic. UNICEF is providing technical support to the MOH to develop COVID-19 vaccine deployment plan, strengthen the supply chain and cold chain system, generate demand and community engagement, which will facilitate the country’s readiness of receiving COVID-19 vaccine in the first quarter of 2021.

To reduce preventable newborn death, UNICEF provided support to scaling up of perinatal death audits in 7 tertiary level and three secondary level perinatal facilities. Perinatal health care system in the most deprived region (Karakalpakstan) is strengthened by introducing a quality improvement approach, improving the infrastructure, and providing medical equipment in labor rooms and neonatal intensive care unit, resulting in 20,000 most vulnerable mothers, and newborns access to quality perinatal health services.

The Government of Uzbekistan with due consideration to the gender differentiated nutritional needs of girls and women has issued national maternal and child nutrition strategy and action plan for 2020-2025 targeting seven million children and 5.7 women annually.
UNICEF modelled universal-progressive home visiting including gender socialization aspect in three districts of three deprived regions accompanied by technical assistance and advocacy, which has resulted in the adoption of the model for the nationwide replication funded from the state budget as part of the same Plan. The initiative covers essential elements of nurturing care, such as health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and early learning, which contributes to young child wellbeing.

To strengthen health management information system, UNICEF provided support to MoH to develop an electronic “pregnancy” registration system and update the "Electronic Registration of Birth and Death” system. By using standardized reporting form for health facilities and standardized methods of presentation of information via generic dashboards, the updated systems support the use of data for decision making at multiples levels (national, subnational, district, and facility). These systems also link to birth registration and other e-governance systems, which are expected to facilitate awareness for timely birth registration and claim child benefits.

UNICEF supports the Ministry in implementing the road map on the elimination of mother to child transmission of HIV/syphilis, which was approved by the MOH in mid-2020 and expected to cover 800,000 pregnant women, children, and adolescents annually.

With UNICEF’s COVID-19 response, 16,914 (14715 females and 2199 males) health care providers received personal protection equipment, millions of PCR tests were conducted with lab commodities procured by UNICEF. Based on the received evidence from the UNICEF supported self-assessment of water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in health care facilities (HCF) and WASH in school UNICEF successfully advocated with the Government, international financial institutes and donors to invest on WASH with due consideration to the gender needs and the needs of persons and children with disabilities.

**Goal area 2. Every Child Learns**

In 2020 UNICEF provided technical support to the Government to operationalize the new Law on Preschool Education (2019), revise the Law on Education (2020), develop a Presidential Decree # 4860 (2020) on inclusive education; develop the Education Quality Assurance Framework (EQAF); draft the Teacher Qualification Frameworks (TQF) and competency-based Teacher Professional Standards (TPS) and revision of teacher attestation mechanisms and evaluation criteria aimed at improving governance and accountability in the education sector.

The Action Plan for adapting inclusive education now aims to make 51 percent of the schools provide inclusive education by 2025. The EQAF is now ready to be implemented in around 14,000 preschools and over 10,000 general secondary schools. The draft TQF and competency-based TPS are expected to enhance the professional standards and continuous professional development of over 100,000
preschool teachers and 420,000 teachers in basic education.

In Early Childhood Education (ECE), UNICEF-supported activities contributed to the increase in preschool provisions and enrollments and enhanced the quality and content of ECE provided in preschools. Through the public-private partnership (PPP) mode and other alternative ECE provisions, the enrollment rates in preschool education among 3-6 years have increased from around 20 percent in 2015 to close to 49 percent as of 2020. Moreover, UNICEF support included the development of Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS); a new competency-based preschool curriculum; a cascaded in-service training program; six guidebooks to support teacher capacity and preschool Education Management Information System (EMIS).

While all schools/preschools were closed in mid-March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, by December 2020, 99 percent of the schools and 90 percent of the preschools re-opened and were functioning; compared to the preschool enrollment rate of 48 percent (among 3–6-year-old during December 2019), in December 2020 close to 37 percent of the 3–6-year-olds are attending preschools; and out of the 6.2 million school-going children who were forced to learn at home during the pandemic, more than 75 percent are back to school, while the rest still use distance learning.

UNICEF supported the Government in carrying out: (a) WASH analysis at preschools and schools; and (b) rapid assessments to understand the outreach and impact of Distance Learning programmes in ECE and school education. Based on the WASH analysis, the safe school/preschool Re-opening Guidelines and materials were developed and disseminated, reaching approximately six million children attending preschools/schools and 500,000 preschool/school teachers and parents.

During the lockdown, UNICEF supported the Government in transforming education continuity by developing and broadcasting video lessons through television and social media platforms. Initially, 3,392 video lessons equivalent to 3,368 hours (for grades 1-11; covering all core subjects and lessons in Russian, Uzbek and Karakalpak languages) were broadcasted, followed by 120 lessons for English, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. Since school re-opening in September 2020, a total of 5,192 video lessons have been created and broadcasted.

UNICEF’s Rapid Assessments on ECCE and Distance Learning programme highlighted that the television programmes reached around 90 percent of country’s preschool/school-going children. It is feared that the education disruptions and the differential access and effectiveness of distance learning modalities across student groups have not only resulted in overall substantial learning losses but also has exacerbated existing inequalities in learning opportunities and outcomes. In order to assess and compensate the learning losses, the Government, with UNICEF support has developed blended learning programmes as well as individualized learning remedial and “catch up” programmes, which are currently being rolled out.

**Goal area 3. Every Child is Protected from Violence and Exploitation**
As of December 2020, UNICEF supported trained social workers and psychologists to reach 129,309 children, parents and caregivers with community-based psychosocial support. About 3,000 children (1,015 girls) and 1,600 service providers (1,556 female staff) in 31 residential care institutions all over the country, including specialized correctional facilities for children, benefitted from the delivery of 40,000 units of hygiene and protective supplies.

Following the implementation of Presidential Resolution #4185 in 2019, UNICEF provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Public Education to establish an inter-agency working group to conceptualize the Cabinet of Ministers’ Action Plan #824 of September 2019 on De-institutionalization. As a result, De-institutionalization and Foster Care Concept Notes have been developed to demonstrate how comprehensive childcare system reform should be implemented at the sub-national level.

As a result of UNICEF’s advocacy, the Government prioritized the release of remaining children from closed facilities in Samarkand and Kokand into their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. As of December 2020, with the support of UNICEF, 356 children have been reintegrated into their families and communities.

While UNICEF continues to provide services to 48 Uzbek women and 172 children previously returned from armed conflict zones to be fully integrated back into their communities, in the reporting period, UNICEF also succeeded in its advocacy efforts to prioritize the repatriation of the remaining women and children from Syria thus in December 2020, an additional 25 women and 73 children were repatriated back to Uzbekistan.

**Goal area 5. Every Child Has an Equitable Chance in Life**

In 2020, the UN Joint Programme on strengthening social protection was launched as a collaboration of ILO, UNDP and UNICEF and funded by Joint SDG Fund. The programme is envisaged to develop the national social protection strategy, the institutional framework for integrated social protection provision and moving towards the social model of disability assessment. Draft concepts are developed and are being discussed at the highest levels. They are being developed in close collaboration with the World Bank, which is leading on the development of the national poverty reduction strategy for Uzbekistan. Once fully unfolded, the new system will make social protection accessible to every person living in the country, prioritizing vulnerable groups such as children, youth, women, people with disabilities and families in poverty.

A unified registration system for social benefits and services, the Single Registry, was launched in one of the regions and then rolled out nationwide. The system implies end-to-end digitization of the processes related to applying, assigning and paying social allowances to low-income families and currently covers over one million households nationwide and processes nearly 150,000 new applications every month. The system has also been actively used for implementing COVID-19
response measures benefiting directly around **250,000 households with children.**

The pioneering national study on the state of young people in Uzbekistan was launched presenting evidence on youth marginalization, especially of girls and women. For example, over half of the young people not in education, employment or training are 19-30 years old women, and twice as many girls do not use the internet (68.1 percent) than boys. The study forms evidence base for UNICEF’s initiatives on supporting adolescent and youth development and empowerment in Uzbekistan. The study’s findings were widely discussed with national partners, including the state Youth Affairs Agency under the Presidential Administration.

Uzbekistan became the number one U-Report country in ECAR with over 117,000 U-Reporters. Findings of the U-report are actively used for decision making among national partners. For example, findings of one of the polls stimulated reduction of the university tuition fees for 2020-2021 by 10 percent. During the pandemic, U-report became an effective instrument for quick dissemination of reliable information among young people.

As a result of UNICEF advocacy, the first-ever Child Rights Ombudsperson was appointed in March 2020, and a new partnership started with the implementation of the work plan based on the Presidential Resolution “On additional measures to improve the system for protecting the rights of the child” adopted in May 2020 envisaging strengthening the role and mandate of the Child Rights Ombudsperson in line with international standards and provision of the needed support to children and families at the national and local levels including through the children’ hotline and by the trained specialists.

UNICEF has used the celebration of the World Children’ Day (WCD) as an opportunity to bring attention to children rights and importance of their assurance for realization in times of global disturbance such as the COVID. UNICEF in collaboration with the Zamin Foundation organized the International Web Forum on “Children’s Right to Education: Relevance, Continuity and Innovation during the Pandemic” with deliberations and sharing of international experiences in ensuring child right to quality education and experiences and innovations to ensure lifelong learning, including inclusive education. On November 20, UNICEF jointly with the Parliament and the Child Rights Ombudsperson presented the Situational Analysis of Children in Uzbekistan.

**Gender Equality**

UNICEF Uzbekistan with support of the Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia conducted the Gender Programmatic Review (GPR) in line with UNICEF’s Gender Action Plan for 2018-2022. The findings of the review focused on assessing potential entry points for gender mainstreaming across programmes and identifying priority areas for further investment. As a result, to develop gender-responsive and gender-transformative interventions, the CO was recommended to look into three aspects: reflect the commitment to gender-responsiveness at all levels of results framework; look beyond gender-disaggregated data as a marker for gender equality and strengthen the capacity of staff
and partners to apply a gender-based analytical lens to all interventions.

The preliminary findings of the analysis on adolescent health conducted in 2020 revealed that negative social norms and stereotypes affect adolescent’s wellbeing, especially girls’ independence to make decisions on issues about their future. The assessment of community social services workforce's responsibilities in responding to different forms of vulnerabilities including gender-based violence (GBV) revealed the need for revision of functional responsibilities of the relevant staff for the integration of social work competencies, including case management approach for prevention and responding to GBV.

**UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships**

UNICEF, jointly with UNFPA and UNODC, mobilized 3.5 Million USD for the Aral Sea joint programme to empower adolescent and young people to become positive agents of change, successfully realize their full potential, and contribute to local socio-economic development and mitigating negative consequences of COVID-19 in the Republic of Karakalpak.

As part of the response to alleviate COVID-19’s impact on the most vulnerable groups of the population, UNICEF collaborated with UNDP, UNFPA and IOM. Through joint efforts, supported by the Multi-Partner Trust Fund, UNICEF ensured psychosocial support to families repatriated from armed conflict zones and children leaving specialized correctional institutions. Among others, the support activities included building the capacity of family specialists, social workers and psychologists to deal with the caseloads of vulnerable families affected by the pandemic.

In 2020, UNICEF Uzbekistan placed a strong focus on the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) preparation and ensured that priorities and the voices of children and young people were adequately reflected. This was achieved through engagement and partnership with the UN Country Team (UNCT) to ensure child rights issues are strategically represented within new UNSDCF. The UNSDCF recognizes UNICEF’s capacity to support the implementation of key strategic priorities: Effective governance and justice for all; Inclusive human capital development; Sustainable, Climate-responsible development; and cross-cutting areas such as enhancing statistical capabilities of the Government.

In 2020, UNICEF continued partnership with the World Bank, Ministry of Finance and other national partners on Single Registry. UNICEF partnered with ILO, UNDP, UNODC and WHO to successfully mobilize the Joint SDG funds for strengthening social protection and improving national financing framework to accelerate SDGs in Uzbekistan. Partnerships were established with respective government agencies and the Parliament, including youth NGOs on youth-related issues. Over 25 government agencies, CSOs and development partners are regular partners of U-Report.

A strategic partnership that started in 2018 with the National TV and Radio Company (NTRC) continued to yield many results in highlighting children’s issues. This partnership has strategically been
the most fruitful of media partnerships and has single-handedly led to more media coverage for instance on issues children’s health, immunization, preventing unnecessary placement of children in residential institutions and child protection issues.

As part of the UN Communication Group, UNICEF collaborated with UN agencies and worked with the World Health Organisation to execute successful Risk Communication and Community Engagement work. Further, UNICEF partnered with the National Association of Person with Disabilities to amplify key messages on inclusion, fighting stigma and discrimination. This push was extensively covered with the photo essay having an elongated shelf life in key national media publication and sparking positive portrayal of persons with disabilities.

UNICEF’s partnership with the State Committee on Statistics has reached another level with a commitment to generate international comparable and disaggregated data. Despite the lockdown due to the COVID, the Government with UNICEF support has continued preparations to conduct MICS with specific precautionary measures to protect both the population and the MICS teams.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Lessons Learned

In 2020, UNICEF Uzbekistan completed the evaluation of its country programme circle for 2016-2020 with the main lessons learnt applied immediately and in developing the new programme of cooperation between UNICEF and the Government of Uzbekistan for 2021-2025.

It was recognized that UNICEF Uzbekistan successfully adapts to a rapidly changing external environment by adjusting its mode of operations in a very short time. The key to this success was an effective analysis of the external context and maintaining focus on UNICEF priorities while capitalizing on the new opportunities for policy dialogue. The effectiveness of this approach was once more proved with the onset of the COVID leading to adjusting of UNICEF operations to remote mode but still delivering the services, advocating for and developing new programmes and policies. UNICEF could use momentum to secure a new strategic positioning as a broker of resources with new alliances and new sources of funding.

UNICEF Uzbekistan has engaged in discussions of new partnerships with International Financial Institutions and potential donors and non-traditional funding sources. UNICEF in Uzbekistan has the comparative advantage of its reputation and mandate for child rights which means it has the legitimacy to lead on issues that others may find difficult to broach such as inequity, social exclusion, and gender, and to use potentially sensitive issues such as violence against children to challenge social norms.

The Gender Programmatic review (GPR) and Country Programme evaluation conducted in 2020 showed clearly that to deliver results for women successfully, young people and children it is important for UNICEF to meet the highest quality standards of gender responsiveness programming. As a follow-up, UNICEF Uzbekistan already started introducing changes such as the establishment of the post of Gender/Inclusion Specialist and development of the Country Office Gender and Disability Strategies in the new country programme.
The Country Office produced effective results when there are deliberate efforts for cross-sectoral collaboration. There is much more potential for further strategic collaborations to contribute to a greater dynamism and more effective results for all stakeholders. Supporting reform initiatives, including modelling of approaches requires the integration, scale-up and institutionalization mechanisms from the onset to ensure sustainability. The institutionalization of assistance is key to ensuring sustainability and bringing about long-term change. Institutionalization tends to face administrative and legal barriers, which need to be recognized and addressed in the risk-mitigation strategy, which should underpin the implementation of the reform support initiative.

Innovations

In 2020 COVID-19 proved to be the major factor influencing innovations in the country office mainly to ensure continuity of program interventions while minimizing the risks to COVID-19 infection to staff, partners and children. The following examples serve to illustrate this fact:

Blended Learning: The Government has decided to continue the use of distance learning in a blended approach. In order to address learning losses due to compromised lessons during the last term of the academic year, 2019-2020 as a result of covid-19 UNICEF supported the Government to come up with guidelines to enhance teacher capacities to assess students’ learning, identify gaps and prepare individualized remedial education plans including guidelines to enhance teachers’ and students’ capacity to study through “blended” learning mode which would have been unthinkable before COVID-19. The positive spin-off of this innovation is the government commitment to improve the ICT infrastructure and internet access to all schools in Uzbekistan.

Adapting training and workshops to the online platforms: As a response to travel restrictions and social distancing requirements, many online trainings were adapted as a duty of care measure to minimize the risk of infection to Covid-19. While many trainings were cancelled, UNICEF managed to facilitate the design and delivery of a certified four-month online re-training programme on Social Work for more than 70 service providers from different agencies. This activity is aimed at improving the competency of service providers in bringing positive changes in the lives of vulnerable people by addressing social challenges such as poverty, violence, family separation, disability, discrimination, and others.

Ongoing classical MICS operation: Uzbekistan is the only country in the ECA region which despite COVID-19 had to continue with field-based MICS operation by applying available precautions: use of PPE, physical distancing, regular PCR testing, vaccination against flu and pneumonia, medical insurance for the engaged teams. A successful MICS will yield reliable, up-to-date and internationally comparable data including children-related indicators.