Update on the context and situation of children

Panama is a high-income country since 2018. However, growth projections indicate a -11.0% contraction of Panama’s gross domestic product, because of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic. The government had to adjust its spending budget due to the sharp drop in its tax revenue, exacerbated by the health emergency, potentially impacting services directed at children.

Due to Covid-19, 7 of 10 households with children lost their income totally or partially. According to ECLAC projections, poverty will increase by 2%, the Gini index by up to 3.9%. The deep socio-economic inequalities and pre-existing deprivation make the effects of the pandemic much more complex. Panama’s Gini coefficient is 0.49, being the 12th most unequal country in the world and 4th in the region. As a response, the President launched this year the Bicentennial Pact "Closing Gaps" to reach national agreements to reduce inequalities in health, social security, education, economy, security and basic services, with participation of all productive sectors and citizens. Besides the Pact, Panama continues to implement its national poverty reduction plan (Plan Colmena) and Covid-19 response program (Panama Solidario).

Children make up 32% of the population. The poverty rate is 41.4% in rural, 11% in urban areas. One of two people who are multidimensionally poor is under 18, and 32.8% of children are multidimensionally poor. Social Cabinet developed a local MPI useful for the design of local poverty reduction plans, relevant in the context of Covid-19. The social protection system is limited in scope. The flagship public cash transfer program benefits 1 in 4 multidimensionally poor children. It does not have a contingency plan for being scaled up during emergency and runs parallel to Panama Solidario. Panama strengthened institutional mechanisms for monitoring and reporting progress of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, the analysis published in 2020 has not yet summarized the situation of children in relation to key SDGs.

The infant mortality rate has not declined in the last 5 years (14 children per 1,000 births). There are clear geographical inequalities, with indigenous regions the most affected. Maternal mortality decreased from 65 women per 100,000 births in 2012 to 45 in 2018. Although nationally 91% of households with children have access to clean water, high territorial disparities are evident.

Malnutrition affects 15.8% of children under 5, in indigenous areas 39%. In the past 11 years, the rate declined by 3.3%, in indigenous regions by 23%. Only 28.1% of children under 6 months are exclusively breastfed. The pandemic affected children’s nutrition. 47% of households with children had less food available than usual, improving by 6% towards the end of the year.

Provision of comprehensive care and stimulation services is insufficient. Only 2.7% of children under 3 are enrolled in public early childhood development (ECD) services. Panama launched this year a law on ECD that establishes a legal and governance framework to promote ECD in coordination with the social protection system. Challenges remain in implementing public policy and quality services.

Although preschool education is compulsory, prior to Covid-19, around 40% of children aged 4 to 5 did not attend preschool. The net enrolment rate in primary education was 90%, with gender balance, but 6% of students are over-age. Prior to Covid-19, 7 in 10 adolescents aged 12 to 14 were enrolled in lower secondary education, and 5 in 10 adolescents aged 15 to 17 in upper secondary education. High territorial disparities are evident. The net enrolment rate in secondary education is 48% for boys and 57% for girls. For more details see our SitAn.

Panamacurrently has one of the highest rates per inhabitants of Covid-19 cases reported worldwide. As of January 7th, 2021, the country reports 264,956 infections since the pandemic began. The pandemic disrupted educational services at all levels, leading to educational lags and increased school exclusion. This year's registration in ECD programs declined by more than 50%. Only 61% of public school students have internet access at home compared with 92% in private schools. In the
indigenous Ngäbe-Buglé region, only 6% of students have this access. Official distance learning started after a disruption of over 4 months. Despite an increase in enrollment from 5 of 10 households with children in May to 8 of 10 in October, quality of distance education poses a challenge. Many schools are not connected to internet and the majority do not have access to drinkable water. The deficiencies in the educational system impact youth development and employment. 119,340 young people aged 15 to 24, representing 17.2% of this group, are neither in education nor employment (NEET). Challenges remain in meaningful participation of adolescents in policies that affect them. Children suffer various forms of violence in their family, community and school environments. 64% of those who reported sexual violence are under 18, of whom 91% are female. Violence in the family increasingly affects children, with 70% of cases involving abandonment, neglect or negligence. Violent discipline at home affects 44.5% of children. Indigenous girls show greater vulnerability. The ways in which the isolation due to Covid-19 affect violence against children remain to be determined. Conflicts occurred in 1 of 3 households, increasing to 1 in 2 towards the end of the year. 1 of 2 households are very concerned about the impact Covid-19 could have on their children’s mental health and wellbeing.

Migrant children require special attention. The pandemic affected migratory flows, humanitarian conditions and access to international protection of people on the move, increasing their vulnerability, particularly of children. In 2019, 24,000 extracontinental migrants and refugees entered Panama through the dangerous Darien jungle. Despite border closure in 2020, more than 6,000 people entered through this route, 30% of them children and 300 pregnant women.

The health, social and economic crisis caused by Covid-19 highlights the existing inequality, and exacerbates gaps in multiple dimensions, such as socioeconomic, territorial, gender, intercultural, disability and immigration status that are yet to be demonstrated. The long-term impacts are only beginning to emerge, but effects on children can already be seen, including increased educational exclusion and exposure to violence.

**Major contributions and drivers of results**

UNICEF contributed to significant national results in education, child protection and migration, jointly with the government, other UN agencies, civil society, the private sector and academia. PCO adapted its program to respond to new government’s priorities and needs of children during Covid-19 through the design of an emergency response plan and the UN socio-economic response plan (SERP). We significantly widen our network, strengthened partnerships with CSOs/IPs, reaching 12K children directly and 400K indirectly. We tripled the number of implementing partners and executed a budget that increased by more than 25% compared to the previous year. PCO reorganized staff functions to cope with the emerging needs resulting from the pandemic and other emergencies including the humanitarian needs of children on the move and hurricanes. PCO designed the new CPD and PSNs, UNSDCF and a new SERP for Covid-19.

1. **Education:** As a contribution to the implementation of comprehensive public policies and quality social services, UNICEF contributed to reducing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and ensuring continuity of their education, particularly those living in indigenous and disadvantaged urban areas. PCO established strategic partnerships, generated evidence, used the power of communication and leveraged resources to support distance learning while preparing to the safe reopening of schools.

The pandemic affected all regular services and programs for children, particularly education. To minimize the impacts on education, PCO accompanied the Ministry of Education (MEDUCA) to
adapt the educational system to the emergency context through high level technical assistance in curricular adaptation and prioritization, training in education in emergencies, psychosocial support for children and teachers, and production of education materials in multiple formats to promote education and stimulation at home. A focus was placed on children, parents and caregivers in sectors with greater socioeconomic vulnerability, including children with disability.

PCO provided training to directors and regional supervisors on the operationalization of the curriculum for distance learning and advice in educational technology to the National Directorate of Teacher Training and Professional Improvement.

UNICEF’s contribution ensured access to education for 394,813 children (55.8% of 706,942 students enrolled) and guaranteed the continuation of educational services at preschool, primary and secondary level through distance learning, including intercultural education for indigenous children. 3,250 teachers and supervisors strengthen their skills in distance learning and technology use.

UNICEF publicly and privately advocated for the reopening of schools and preschool education services (CAIPIs). PCO provided advice to MEDUCA and the Ministry of Social Development (MIDES) to support the preparation for the safe reopening of CAIPIs. Biosecurity protocol and guidelines with tools and training plan for CAIPI’s directors, endorsed by the Ministry of Health (MINSA), are now available. PCO will continue supporting these advocacy efforts.

PCO continued its position as a strategic partner for technical advice and evidence generation to strengthen early childhood services. We established strategic partnerships for capacity building. We collaborated with University of Chile and Tulane to review the evidence on Covid-19 effects in early childhood, supported MINSA to review a guideline that allows to identify health developmental disorders in children under three, and enhanced capacities of MIDES through training for preschool teachers on risk management. A focus was on strengthening Care for Child Development at national and local level. Specifically, a downstream pilot initiative implemented in the province of Panama Oeste through United Way enhanced parenting skills among 1,250 families, who also received kits with audio-visual materials to promote Care for Child Development and education.

During early lockdown, PCO through a PPP with MEDUCA and Fundación Hombre de la Mancha produced a series of 55 educational videos “Leemos un cuento” for children aged 3 to 7 years broadcasted on social and mass media, ensuring ECD and learning continuity during school closures. This allowed to reach 20K children and support parents in their novel at home teaching role. PCO also produced a series of five videos with orientation for caring of small children at home that reached thousands of families.

UNICEF completed the evaluation of the Five-Year Plan for Intercultural Education (EIB). The evidence generated of the results achieved by the Plan in the seven indigenous peoples will be used to improve policies and programs. Findings suggested the need to review the existing EIB governance framework. However, the use MEDUCA will give to this evidence remains a challenge. PCO will provide technical support to MEDUCA to implement some of the recommendations.

In collaboration with Fundación Excelencia Educativa, PCO initiated the production of a mass media campaign to advocate for the safe return to school in 2021 and prevent further educational exclusion. This campaign will be complemented by a study exploring factors of school exclusion.

2. Protection: As a contribution to the implementation of effective systems for prevention and comprehensive protection against all forms of violence, including gender-based violence, UNICEF combined technical assistance and evidence generation to inform upstream national-
level actions and support local protection models.

With technical assistance from PCO, the National Intersectoral Committee for the Prevention of Violence against Children and Adolescents (CONIPREVINNA) adapted its action plan to the context of Covid-19. This facilitates the reactivation of this coordinating mechanism and the implementation of the national Violence Prevention Strategy against Children and Adolescents adopted by Panama with support from UNICEF.

PCO built capacity on family care modalities of 110 protection technical staff from various entities, CSOs and the National Committee for the Return of Children without Parental Care to a Family Environment (CONADINNA) to promote the right of children to grow up in a family environment for those who lost or are at risk of losing parental care. CONADINNA was supported to adjust its action plan to the effects of Covid-19. Capacity building and awareness-raising contributed to a shift of paradigm and action among protection entities towards an agreement on the need to deinstitutionalization. 1,497 children currently live in alternative care institutions (665 boys, 832 girls) and these figures are expected to further decrease as a result of UNICEF’s support.

In response to the effects of Covid-19, UNICEF jointly with the Public Prosecutor's Office monitored rates of violence against children and gender-based violence, especially domestic violence and sexual violence against girls, and advocated for ensuring that protection systems (reporting and intervention services) remained in place. The data and analysis were presented in a policy brief for a life free of violence for children, and key messages disseminated in social media to prevent violence.

PCO provided technical assistance to SENNIAF to develop a psychotherapeutic model for girls, boys and adolescent victims of sexual violence. This included training for 39 staff to standardize the response services to victims of sexual abuse, and the design of group therapy manuals for victims, addressing gender roles and social norms related to GBV. This benefited 3,288 victims (2,951 girls, 306 boys). UNICEF’s support contributed to ensure a better response of the protection system during Covid-19.

To support local protection models during Covid-19, UNICEF partnered with two community-based social organizations, Fundación Espacio Creativo and Voces Vitales to ensure psychosocial support to 344 children and their caregivers, including 103 adolescent mothers, in vulnerable urban areas in the municipalities of Panama, San Miguelito and Panama Oeste. PCO promotes holistic, community-led services, focusing on strengthening family and social support and psychosocial support systems.

Through Organización de Ayuda Integral para el Desarrollo together with Faith Communities, PCO promoted a community-based joint task force for positive parenting practices and prevention of violence against children in the Province of Colón, convening 60 organizations and entities to define the platform's work plan. The initiative strengthens the capacities of Faith Communities and children to address violence from a rights and equity approach and will reach more than 115K children.

In response to the hurricane emergency, PCO accompanied MIDES to implement a psychosocial support model, Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) for affected children, benefitting 84 children.

UNICEF disseminated the recommendations of the 2019 evaluation on the efficacy and relevance of resocialization services offered to youth in conflict with the law, to the Ministry of Government to ensure youth in conflict with the law are receiving effective resocialization services.

UNICEF conducted a gender programmatic review (GPR) to identify strategies to contribute to the UNICEF Gender Action Plan. The gender strategy will serve as a guide for implementation for our
next country program to identify gender stereotypes associated with parenting practices, promote parental co-responsibility, strengthen policies to eradicate gender inequalities, reduce exclusion of adolescent girls from school, and strengthen prevention of gender and sexual violence and victims’ access to care. Recommendations from this GPR were also used to inform the UNSDCF.

3. Social Policy: As a contribution to strengthening capacities for the articulation of multi-sectoral public policies with an equity perspective, UNICEF increased government and civil society capacity to plan public policies for children. As a result, Panama has now a comprehensive legislation for the protection and development of early childhood and is moving forward to implement better-quality services and an improved governance.

UNICEF’s continued advocacy efforts, upstream policy support and technical assistance to the government resulted in joint programming of institutions and the approval by the Assembly of a new Law on Early Childhood Services in October 2020, recognizing the importance of comprehensive protection and early development as a national policy. This shows the government’s commitment to ECD policies and to strengthen mechanisms for intersectoral articulation. PCO supported MIDES in the design of a ECD webinar attended by more than 500 persons from various institutions of the Early Childhood Services Roadmap (RAPI). PCO will accompany the government to implement the law and to increase coverage and quality of ECD services.

To advocate for the rights of children during Covid-19, UNICEF generated evidence about the situation of families, specifically on how the crisis is affecting their economic situation, access to food, health services, and distance education, as well as mental health and a potential increase of violence at home. PCO conducted two rapid surveys that targeted low-income families. The results were widely disseminated and contributed to guide interventions from the government and the UN. Also, PCO mapped childhood indicators in administrative systems and surveys to visualize data gaps. It offers a diagnosis on child SDG indicators not currently collected by the government. The mapping is publicly accessible and guides our advocacy for introducing childhood indicators in upcoming surveys.

A series of policy briefs, entitled “Public Policy Dialogues for Children”, contributed to the analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on children. Issues such as household income and its impact on child nutrition, adaptation of health services to respond to the needs of early childhood, the impact of confinement in children and protection from violence, were analyzed based on fresh empirical evidence and policy recommendations were included. The briefs, conducted jointly with academia, were widely disseminated, discussed with a larger public and accompanied by a “social listening” tool to gather reactions from households.

As part of UNICEF’s advocacy and resource mobilization for other social protection measures to compensate for families’ economical losses, a multipurpose cash transfer program for families deprived of income during the pandemic supported school attendance for 250 children in 120 families (including 22 migrant families) that were hardly hit by the economic restrictions. 50% of the beneficiary households are led by women. This program was developed based on the lessons learned from an earlier program that supported migrant families with a multi-purpose cash transfer.

4. UNICEF’s migration and humanitarian response, including interventions in WASH, health, child and social protection in the provinces of Darien, Chiriqui and in Panama City reached more than 7,000 people, prioritizing the needs of children and families on the move transiting through Panama to North destinations, Darien host communities, and Venezuelan migrants. The humanitarian response to people affected by hurricanes reached 3,800.
UNICEF’s migration and emergency interventions focused on: i) Humanitarian response for extracontinental migrants and refugees of different nationalities who enter through Darien (border with Colombia) in transit to North America and for rural host communities, ii) Mitigation of the impact of Covid-19 on the Venezuelan migrant families residing in Panama and, iii) Support to the government’s hurricane emergency response in five provinces and two indigenous regions.

**Humanitarian response for extracontinental migrants and refugees**: UNICEF delivered interventions in WASH, maternal and child health, and child protection in Darien and Chiriquí Provinces. These actions reached more than 6,000 people, prioritizing the needs of children and pregnant women.

Humanitarian interventions in WASH implemented in Darien in alliance with the International Committee of the Red Cross (IFRC) and community water committees ensured the provision of 74,000 liters of safe drinking water per day for migrants, host communities and civil servants in two Migrant Reception Stations. Jerry cans and 6,800 personal hygiene kits were provided.

Specificaly, IFRC rehabilitated a water treatment and distribution system for the indigenous host community of Bajo Chiquito to ensure safe water provision by installing sand filters, activated carbon, and a chlorinator. 24,000 liters per day are purified. Community volunteers and civil servants were trained on how to keep the water treatment and distribution system functioning. PCO through IFRC supported the reactivation of the water committee in La Peñita Migratory Reception Station, provided training and delivered chemicals and machinery. 50,000 liters of water per day are purified.

Child Protection: Closed borders due to Covid-19 left more than 2,500 people stranded at the Migratory Reception Stations in Panama, a third of those children, most of them under five. This population faced severe living conditions for several months. Therefore, PCO prioritized establishing protection services to prevent violence and exploitation, through i) CFS and ii) Protection by presence and case management. PCO in alliance with RET Americas and HIAS delivered psychosocial support and ECD activities involving parents, caregivers and communities to build protective environments.

UNICEF’s field monitoring allowed to adjust the humanitarian response, issue early warnings, mobilize joint UN interventions through the Human Mobility Group, and coordinate with local government. In May 2020, Protection Measures established by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights made a call to the Panamanian State to guarantee life and health as rights of this population.

**Development interventions for Venezuelan migrants residing in Panama** focused on education, psychosocial support, and social protection. Families were accompanied to adapt to the distance education modalities. As an effect of confinement, anxiety was identified in the families. Children were found with suspended educational processes. Families did not know how to access distance education. UNICEF’s support through a PCA with the Refugee Education Trust Americas allowed 300 children to complete the school year, 12 high school students to graduate, and continuous psychosocial support to 100 caregivers and 100 students.

**Hurricane response**: UNICEF supported the government’s response to the impact of ETA and IOTA hurricanes through technical assistance in child and maternal health and nutrition, child protection and supplies (thermal blankets, tents, etc.) reaching more than 3,800 persons. UNICEF conducted a needs assessment of sheltered children and developed a contingency response plan with the government. Through our partner HIAS, CFS were implemented in three shelters in the Province of Chiriquí. PCO in alliance with MIDES trained civil servants in psychosocial methodologies to attend children.
**UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships**

**Developing and leveraging resources and partnerships for children**

UNICEF actively participated in weekly UNCT Covid-19 Crisis Management Team meetings to coordinate the response to the pandemic and following PAHO/WHO technical recommendations. UNICEF followed and addressed the UN response plan for Panama. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was informed of UNICEF’s response through the Resident Coordinator Office. PCO participated in UN interagency groups including the gender interagency group, to promote relevant actions in gender equality in conjunction with UN Women, UNFPA, UNDP and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, IOM and PAHO. UNICEF delivered interventions for migrant children and pregnant women in partnership with IFRC, HIAS and RET, with support of the BPRM (Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration).

UNICEF engaged new partners and mobilized resources for the cause of children. Panama receives loans from different IFIs which allows to build partnerships and ensure child-right-sensitive clauses are included in loan agreements. The pandemic brought actors closer together. Strategic partnerships were established with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and Latin America Development Bank to jointly promote an agenda for the education sector, including ECD, preprimary and secondary education (*Educación Mesoamérica*). To achieve these partnerships in 2021, it is crucial to find global legal and financial enabling mechanisms.

PCO used innovative approaches to leverage private sector alliances to respond rapidly to the emergency context and to scale up reach to families. We used corporate alliances to develop quick actions to impact the needs of children. This included a public-private partnership to produce educational assets for children, alliances to promote child online protection actions and fundraising pilots. We generated evidence on the impact of the strict lockdown in Panama affecting children’s families. As for the media, in alliance with the Latin-American Center for Journalism, PCO organized training, awards and contests to influence the way the media reports on children. Major milestones included:

1. In partnership with Terpel, we launched our first corporate volunteering initiative *pilot* to provide parents and caregivers with positive parenting information and tools to care for children during confinement and recovery and prevent violence, reaching more than 470 children.

2. *Family Friendly Policies (FFP)* became very relevant this year in which companies were forced to adapt to other work modalities, therefore our actions to position the FFP agenda had an important concurrence from companies. A webinar focused on best practices of business with 45 companies as attendees, a breastfeeding campaign with business allowed us to reach over 10K mothers and fathers, and 10 companies included CRB in their action plans.

3. Fundraising activities such as lead generation webinars, a gaming marathon for fundraising named Twichella during WCD, a telemarketing conversion campaign, etc.

4. As part of the Covid-19 response, alliances were reached to support our actions: Spots and campaigns produced by UNICEF were broadcasted in mass media for free consistently, and a social listening collected the opinion of the population on children’s rights during the pandemic.

**Lessons Learned and Innovations**

1. **PCO designed a flexible Covid-19 Response Plan to align its interventions to the new context.** The health, social and economic crisis caused by the pandemic required to redefine and adapt UNICEF’s work plan in all programmatic areas. The new context dictated the priority lines that needed to be developed during 2020. Accordingly, UNICEF designed a Covid-19 Response Plan which was adapted continuously to ensure interventions were aligned to the situation. As an example, we learned
new ways to respond to violence and to inform the State about good practices.
As a country office in a HIC, we are compelled to respond to emergencies and adapt our work to
different situations, which requires emergency, logistics and supplies expertise, field workers and
specialists, transport, emergency IPs, and an increased budget. Having a multidisciplinary and flexible
approach to the implementation of the country program, addressing different situations that may arise
during the cooperation cycle was crucial in this novel emergency context.

2. Implications of the High-Income Country (HIC) classification for UNICEF’s cooperation
program.
Under the World Bank definition, Panama entered the list of HIC in 2018. However, there are
different approaches used by UN agencies on Panama classification, some still consider Panama an
UMIC (using an innovative approach of resource allocation which adjust GNI per capita for health
inequality). Given the importance of leaving no one behind, it is critical that a clear approach for HIC
programming considers social and economic inequalities and the needs of children beyond income per
capita. The use of the current income-based World Bank classification could have negative
implications for promoting an agenda for children in one of the most unequal countries in the region,
also threatening the access to resources for UNICEF in Panamá. Under the current circumstances, the
organization’s own investment for the PSFR in Panama would be critical to guarantee the
sustainability of the country program.

3. Evidence is key for driving results and winning support for children.
2020 was marked by the need to generate evidence about the situation of families during the Covid-19
emergency. PCO continued to be a rigorous evidence generator and a relentless advocate for children´s
rights during the pandemic. PCO conducted two rapid assessments and used the results to inform,
guide and adapt interventions from the government and the UN.
2020 was also the last year of PCO’s current cooperation cycle. Planning for the next cycle was
grounded on identified priorities to ensure impact at scale. The process of developing the new CPD
was accompanied by a capacity building program in data savviness. This “teach and do” approach
allowed the PCO to strengthen its overall capacity and proficiency in evidence-informed and results-
based program planning. The team increased their awareness on the importance of good evidence-
based causal analysis to set a solid foundation for developing theories of change and strategies,
resulting in the preparation of solid evidence-based Program Strategy Notes (PSNs) and CPD.
Involving the entire CO from the beginning contributed to the joint nature of this endeavor and its
appropriation.

4. Upstream policy work must be combined with local interventions to realize the full potential of
children’s rights.
Given the highly centralized structure of Panamanian institutions, upstream policy work is a necessary
dimension of UNICEF’s cooperation. However, the high levels of inequality that define social
relationships in rural and indigenous territories compel us to refocus attention on sub-national
programming. The provision of technical assistance on key policy issues combined with downstream
work, where interventions directly impact the lives of vulnerable communities, proved effective in
accelerating results for children.

5. UN reform demands a significant investment of time and resources that need to be balanced
against the country office institutional and programmatic priorities.
UNICEF fully participates in the UN reform process and influences the UNSDCF to position
children’s issues through its capacity to provide significant communication and rigorous monitoring.
UNICEF regularly leads and takes part in multi-agency interventions, ensuring children’s rights are
considered in the UN cooperation framework. However, the demand from the UN coordination office
at country level increased significantly in 2020. PCO invested time and human resources to articulate
efforts with the Coordination Office and other UN agencies for topics such as UNSDCF, SERP,
management of the Covid-19 crisis, security issues, etc. It is important to balance demands and pay
special attention to the increased workload as this may affect performance of the CO team.

6. Innovative joint efforts between PFP, Communications and Program sections were key to
develop quick responses that position an agenda for children in the context of Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting the impact on children's safety and wellbeing. Internal cross sectoral collaboration enabled the team to provide a coherent response and high-quality technical support to governmental counterparts and implementing partners. Inter-sectoral collaboration helped the CO to position advocacy messages with decision makers, academia, the private sector, NGOs and the public, and was crucial to harness the power of business and to influence the media culture.