The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) remain out of reach for many children in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). According to most recent data, only 23.6% of child-related SDG indicators are on track to being met by 2030. While this represents an improvement compared to the previous year (20.9%), this is still below the global average (26.9%).

This estimate masks deep inequalities that characterize the region. Progress has been uneven within and between countries, across SDG areas and between population groups. To further exacerbate the situation, early data indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a pernicious effect on the region, both in setting back its development progress, as well as widening the aforementioned gaps.

Before the pandemic, the region already faced numerous challenges ahead. For example, while the completion rate for primary schooling had reached 95%, it remained below 50% for secondary school. In health, progress had stalled for stunting (9% in 2019), childhood obesity (7%), and immunization rates (89%), while maternal mortality rates remained above OECD levels (74 per 100,000 live births). In the same line, 26% of households lacked access to safely managed drinking water, while 70% of them lacked access to basic sanitation services. Finally, the region continued to be characterized by alarming rates of violence. The adolescent murder rate was 5 times that of the global average; 63% of children had been exposed to physical punishment at home; child marriage rate was the second highest in the world (25%), and sexual violence, while understudied, appeared to be an issue.

These challenges were framed by high poverty rates, high inequality, and economic slowdown. Monetary poverty in the region had grown to 30.8%, with its prevalence being higher among children (48.2% among those 14 and younger). Inequality, while on a downward trend, remained high. In addition, coverage for social protection programs in the region was deficient. Only 67% of households with children had any kind of protection. The region began 2020 facing low economic growth, deteriorating terms of trade, and increasing fiscal pressures.

Early evidence shows that the pandemic has made a vulnerable situation worse. Preliminary forecasts estimate that GDP fell by 9% in 2020, and that poverty increased in 4.4 percentage points. Note, however, that this fall in production is not distributed evenly across society. For example, poverty among children and adolescents is expected to rise by more than the average, while they are also at risk of falling into lower lifetime outcome trajectories due to periods out of school or unemployment. Women and immigrants are also expected to take the brunt of the impact of the economic crisis. The former have left the labor force at a greater proportion than men, while the latter usually occupy jobs that are more vulnerable to economic volatility. These phenomena are already leading to downward mobility and an increase in inequality in the region. In the meantime, governments are acting in ever more constrained fiscal spaces, severely limiting their capacity to safeguard the social progress the region achieved during the last decade.

This fall in income will more than likely lead to a deterioration of the situation of children in the region. For example, 39% of households changed their eating strategies during the pandemic. In a similar note, the percentage of children not receiving any education grew from 4% to 18%, while the rest had to transition to often imperfect remote alternatives. Healthcare was affected, with 20% of households foregoing preventive care (associated with immunizations). And while ethical concerns have paused efforts to measure violence against children, secondary evidence indicates that this has likely increased as well (including child marriage). As a consequence of this overall deterioration of social outcomes, the number of children living in multidimensional poverty – globally – is expected to go from 47% to 56%.
As a consequence of the uneven distribution of the economic impacts of the crisis, the deterioration in social outcomes has also been uneven. Households with children, as well as households in the lowest quintile, appear to have had greater impact on their social wellbeing. Women of working age, indigenous people, and Afro-descendent populations are likely to have also lost more than the average person. Finally, many of the services designed to ameliorate these situations have been reduced during the lockdown. In particular, those provided through schools and health centers have seen strong falls in availability. Cash transfer programs, on the other hand, have seen their scope increased, if only in the short term.

Overall, 2020 saw a significant deterioration in the situation of children across the LAC region. Moving forward, the region faces a period of economic uncertainty, dwindling resources, and increased need. Children, in particular, will continue facing vulnerabilities, many of which will reverberate throughout their lifetimes.

[a] Notice that there is insufficient data to measure progress for 60% of indicators.
[i] UNICEF, “Progress for Every Child in the SDG Era: Are We on Track to Achieve the SDGs for Children? The Situation in 2019.”
[iii] WHO and UNICEF, JMP Global Database.
[vi] ECLAC, Social protection for families with children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean.
[viii] ECLAC, Social protection for families with children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean.
[ix] ECLAC, Social protection for families with children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean.

**Major contributions and drivers of results**

**Goal Area 1: Survive and Thrive**

The RO provided technical support and guidance to COs to the Latin American and the Caribbean COs for the areas of Health, Nutrition and HIV. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerated after its arrival on the continent end February 2020, the section provided guidance on preparedness and response, and co-led the regional response with the Emergency Unit. The programmatic focus was on maintaining essential services and generating evidence for action. The pandemic also provided opportunities for introduction or acceleration of intervention areas like digital health and mental health.

Over the past few years, the number of UNICEF COs engaging (again) in Nutrition has been increasing. COVID-19 has accelerated this trend for Health. 24 COs procured hygiene supplies and PPE and 21 COs provided healthcare workers with PPE. Only 7 trained healthcare workers in infection prevention and control, however. Ten COs trained healthcare workers in detecting, referral and appropriate management of COVID-19 cases. Fifteen COs worked on maintaining essential maternal and childcare services and eight worked on nutritional screening of children. Uruguay’s legislation on
The COVID-19 pandemic also caused delays in many aspects of implementation, specifically activities implemented through schools (like on nutrition and mental health), and advocacy events (for EWEC-LAC and others), and other activities that were deprioritized due to the urgency of addressing the pandemic. Pre-COVID-19, most countries were not on track on HIV prevention in adolescents nor on eMTCT. eMTCT is progressing very slowly, with only 6 countries certified so far. With regards to Nutrition, the Eta and Iota hurricanes in Central America showed that UNICEF action and coordination in this area is a challenge in COs without Nutrition interventions pre-emergency. OCHA and other partners often assume that action in Food Security is enough and/or can be combined with Nutrition. The small number of Health and Nutrition staff in the RO section is a challenge, specifically because many COs also have small teams and rely on the RO for technical support. The RO section does not have dedicated capacity for information and knowledge management, which are time consuming tasks.

Goal Area 2: Education

In addition to the health sector response, a key focus of LACRO support in 2020 was on the education response to COVID-19. Countries were supported in providing continued, equity-based learning through distance modalities. Main results were achieved in right-based education sector planning, secondary-age education and skills development, alternative education, distance learning assessment, inclusive education for CwD, IBE, children-on-the-move, supporting parents in nurturing care, stimulation and early learning at home, EVAC, and strengthening national/regional coordination mechanisms. Regional response to COVID-19 included knowledge generation, capacity building and advocacy and guidance for the urgent, safe reopening of schools and ECD centers. TA, quality assurance and oversight on strategic planning was provided to the 24 COs. In November, LACRO published a regional flagship report Education on Hold, accompanied by a comprehensive media coverage in English, Spanish, French and Portuguese.

In terms of access and system strengthening, LACRO continued positioning UNICEF as a key actor for SDG4 implementation/monitoring. In terms of system strengthening, together with IIPE, a Human-Rights-Based Manual for Education Sector Analysis was published which will be key for education sector planning. On secondary-age education, in partnership with CECC/SICA, a sub-regional proposal for the innovation of upper secondary education curricula was developed, which set the basis for the work on curriculum adaptation that was included in CECC/SICA’s COVID-19 Contingency Plan. In collaboration with ECLAC and UNESCO IIPE, a regional study on diversification of Secondary Education was drafted. There were another frameworks and studies developed on alternative education, focus on the Northern Triangle and Mexico Education Initiative and on Alternative Education opportunities for Venezuelan migrant and refugee adolescents and out-of-school adolescents from receiving communities in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. Efforts related to the design of the Mesoamerica Education Initiative (MEI) continued throughout 2020.

On learning, major work was undertaken on learning assessment, through the fourth edition of the standardized learning assessment Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (ERCE) in collaboration with UNESCO (including a module on transferable skills), as well as the development of
guidelines on monitoring learning outcomes in contexts of distance education provision. On skills, a regional discussion paper on skills development was published and work on transferable strengthened through the design and implementation of “Plan 12”- which was developed collaboratively with ADAP-, an adolescent-led initiative based on a social media campaign and on-line course aimed at supporting the development of transferable skills among adolescents in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

On ECD and ECE, the main COVID 19 responses included the #AprendoEnCasa campaign and technical support to CO for the implementation of remote and alternative ECE solutions and modalities. Support and orientations were provided to parents on prevention, nurturing care, positive parenting and VAC, self-care. Frontline workers were enabled to provide remote assistance to parents and caregivers on positive parenting and early learning activities through orientation resources developed by LACRO. Development/Pilot of ECD innovative virtual system (Afinidata)

Goal Area 3: Child Protection

Children faced higher risks during 2020 due to the COVID lockdown that potentially isolated children with abusers and disrupted services such that assistance and monitoring were not as easily accessed. This confirmed the imperative of addressing violence against children, wherever they are - in home, on the move, in institutions. Children on the move faced particular risks as with borders officially closed, it increased the challenge of crossing the border and required more attentive care and legal services. The draft regional theory of change developed captured the importance of eradicating violence in all contexts.

The evidence showed that violence against children continues, and potentially increased during the pandemic, and that this was occurring in a context of lack of services and increased barriers to seeking help due to the COVID restrictions of movement. All countries in the region are active in programming to end violence against children and it is integrated within programming in child protection, education, adolescents, health, etc. and also with programming sectors such as communications and PFP. The risk of violence during COVID provided even more impetus to strengthen the child protection system in countries. Further while progress in integrating violence against children programming into non pandemic emergency responses has been slow, the needs identified with ETA-IOTA brought to the floor the urgent need to address violence, and especially sexual violence. New tools increased the reach of services, for children facing violence, at home, in communities, in institutions and for those on the move.

LACRO supported the COs in the development of helplines, remote psycho-social support and innovative ways to support children in state care with hygiene protocols and also, mapping care settings. Each of these are potentially going to result in a long term change for the child protection systems, recognizing how remote support, while not replacing face to face interactions, can reach more people. At the same time needing to ensure the service quality, INSPIRE workshops were initiated in South America, a review of the social service workforce was conducted, a paper on the relationship between violence against children and violence against women with UN partners was finalized and key messages prepared for COVID context and a paper on violence against children at home during the pandemic was prepared with ECLAC and the SRSG-VAC.

An evidence study with UNHCR has informed the change in migration patterns, notably in Central America with more family units moving distinct from the pattern of individuals a decade ago. With COVID there was also a return of migrants to their place of origin requiring, in some parts of the region, notably in the response to the Venezuela outflow, a different programming approach. Hurricanes Eta and Iota added to the drivers of migration as families lost homes and livelihoods, and already in communities with many families struggling economically and struggling for security in environments dominated by gangs. Cross border collaboration was a focus during the year with many
countries, including within the Quito Process, struggling to find an effective and common way to share the minimal and essential information across borders. A draft protocol was developed to support countries in this endeavour.

Goal Area 4: Safe environment

To achieve the 2030 Agenda, new skills are required in the WASH sector including the understanding of the enabling environment, the analysis of the sector bottlenecks, the accountability for sustainability and the sector public finance. A regional training for COs and their national counterparts was delivered followed by a regional network meeting with COs to reflect on the HOW and establish priorities for RO support to the national sectors agenda. Three WASH BAT workshops followed the training including: 2 WASH-BAT on WASH in Schools in 2 States of Mexico and one at municipal level in Bolivia. A multi-country WASH public finance review started to generate evidence for CO to use and identify countries where in-depth analysis can be conducted with partners such as WB, WHO, IADB.

To have a better impact at national sector level and considering the limited human resources in WASH at CO level, RO identified the need for CO support in understanding the pathways to scale-up models and to have a better understanding of the bottlenecks of the sub-sectors where they have programmatic activities. LACRO systematically supported COs to elaborate the ToC at national scale of the sub-sectors of their interests which then needs to be discussed and validated at sector level to be implemented. Such exercise also clarifies the fact that scaling-up is only feasible by the sector or sub-sector if and only if all the major bottlenecks of the enabling environment, supply, demand and quality control components are removed.

Working towards mainstreaming Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), Preparedness and Climate actions, mainstreamed in UNICEF programming, starting with joint GRIP-RBM trainings, adding climate and disaster risk lens to SitAn/CPD. Joint efforts by C&S and Planning sections, prioritizing COs that are preparing for new CPD. In 7 COs as new CPD countries, such Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia, Argentina, Uruguay and Peru. The RO directly supported guidance and rollout of climate and disaster risk informed programming. Additional priority Country Offices (CO) are advancing with imbedding risk informed programming, with support of LACRO, several countries already carried out Climate Landscape Analysis for Children (CLAC) in order to position of and engage with to advance climate and environment actions at their countries (Guyana, Bolivia, Jamaica, ECA, Haiti, El Salvador, Guatemala, Ecuador and few others in progress like Argentina, Uruguay and Peru).

With the INFORM risk assessment tool, governments in Central America could tailor their humanitarian response based on credible risk analysis. This was proved during the response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota in Honduras and Guatemala, where vulnerable areas were targeted based on INFORM results, enabled a more targeted response. In another instance in Honduras, INFORM was used to identify and support communities in need for cash assistance and WASH support. Promoting and elevating youth networks engagement with climate actors and actions and communication campaign in the lead and during World Children Day (in collaboration with Communication and ADAP teams), at regional and global arenas, LACRO Climate has been proactive in the lead and during WCD #OneGeneration campaign that involved 10 countries, all this culminating into the COP26 in Nov 2021.

Goal Area 5: Equitable Chance

During 2020, LACRO has succeeded in positioning UNICEF as a key actor for the strengthening of social protection systems for children and their families in this region, in a year when COVID-19 has shocked the world and social protection has emerged as one of the key policy responses to mitigate its effects. Technical assistance and followed-up has been done for country policy response, developing a series of Technical Notes on the social protection responses by LAC countries to the COVID-19. A
policy note on universal social protection for children, with emphasis on universal child benefits, has been published together with ECLAC and use for policy advocacy in regional events. LACRO also participates in the Social Development Ministries’ meetings that ECLAC convenes to discuss social policies responses to the pandemic. LACRO has provided efficient support to 14 country offices in their social protection/ cash transfer interventions response to COVID, and completed 3 parallel cash transfer programme designs, and redesign. Through this work, 3 COs (Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica) are supporting Governments’ responses to COVID-19 by expanding their social protection systems, either vertically or horizontally to achieve results at scale. LACRO has supported the risk assessment of cash programming in the region, led by Operations and conducted by KPMG, and supported the organization and facilitation of a regional training for 25 staff on humanitarian cash transfers. A second edition of the training is planned for May 2021.

LACRO has supported the development of a quality instrument to assess the socioeconomic effects of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of families with children. In this regard, the survey work of Argentina and Mexico COs set an excellent example of the results that can be achieved through technical support for countries that conduct strong household surveys that collect information for policy purposes. LACRO has provided technical assistance to COs’ efforts to estimate the effects of COVID-19 on child poverty to several COs. In the case of Colombia CO, we are supporting them to build a National Strategy for reduction of Child Poverty.

In the area of gender, LACRO continued its focus on changing harmful gender norms, adolescent girls’ empowerment and addressing GBV in all contexts and for all populations as well as its collaboration with Child Protection to End Violence Against Children. In terms of regional agenda setting, UNICEF took part in the XIV Regional Conference on Women, ensuring adolescent girls’ participation for the first time ever and the inclusion of specific measures for girls and boys in the related Santiago Commitment and Generation Equality Declaration. While COVID-19 delayed progress in the coordination of the Joint Programme to end child marriage and early unions, the Section continued its advocacy and support to countries engaged in the reduction of this practice (Belize and Dominican Republic) and produced technical guidance for addressing the harmful practice in humanitarian contexts. With a long-term vision to removing discrimination in service delivery for adolescent girls and boys, the Gender Section contributed to global priorities around gender socialization by identifying gender competencies for front line workers with service providers and adolescents alike. Finally, the gender section has contributed to national and regional efforts to ensure that GBV services for adolescent migrant girls are age and culturally appropriate.

Change Strategies and Enablers:

At the level of regional UN partnerships, UNICEF has been actively engaging with PAHO around COVAX, as well as the return to schools which reached a milestone in December 2020 with the meeting between the two Regional Directors (PAHO-UNICEF). UNICEF is working with key partners such as UNDP and ECLAC developing evidence pieces (in the form of policy notes) targeted to public decision makers on the situation and policy recommendations related to sector impacted by COVID-19. Among some of these are COVID-19 related briefs on infant mortality and health access; distance education; social protection and violence against children (corresponding to topics among our regional priorities). UNICEF also has a relevant participation in the Partnerships & Communication Working Group from RCP (former UNSDG-LAC) and oversees developing a state-of-the-art mapping partnerships instrument, based in social network analysis tools. We began a joint initiative with WFP to pilot at the level of selected countries a regional and country offices’-based collaborative action to scale up programmatic solutions with focus on nutrition, return to school, nutrition and social protection.

With the challenges faced by COs across the region in this pandemic year, regional KPIs suffered some drawback the second quarter. The RO closely monitored and followed up with COs requiring
support to swiftly implement corrective measures and address bottlenecks. As part of its oversight role, the RO conducted remote Peer Reviews in collaboration with OIAI, supporting Programme management effectiveness and internal controls of Guatemala and Uruguay COs. In terms of risk management, the RO steered the wide participation of COs in the DFAM e-GRC training which led to the timely completion of 2020 Annual Risk Assessments.

Teleworking and challenges for staff and staff wellbeing

During 2020 LACRO promoted Staff Well-Being initiatives across the region, several HR policies and mechanisms related to work-life balance, such as flexible working arrangements (FWA), availing of peer support volunteers (PSV) and stress counselling. Based on HR measures the staff in LAC region was able exercise different modalities of FWA, including working from home, working from outside duty station, most offices were also able to implement temporary measure of 1 day off per month to recover staff from workload, stress caused by confinement and the time issues created by restrictions.

2020 was also a key period for our continued work on Culture Development, Care and Respect including leading key sessions on Duty of Care and active participation of our RO and Region during Ethics Month including webinars on the Voice Series - Speaking up, Managing Upwards, Managing Difficult Conversations; and LAC Region demonstrated a high engagement on the Global Staff Survey with the highest participation rate 97% and subsequent increasing level of interest on the results of GSS that originated meaningful discussions in our offices.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Drawing on the unprecedented complexities and challenges posted by the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020 has brought about the following lessons learned.

Several UNICEF COs that were not active in Health, became engaged when governments called on them to support the COVID-19 response (the response to the epidemic, and the mitigation of the socioeconomic impacts). This shows that UNICEF is agile and relevant in Health, including in areas where actions had been reduced. For Nutrition this happened to a lesser extent. There have been some constraints in the capacity of UNICEF in the area of health in the LAC region. Low numbers of staff for Health, Nutrition and HIV at CO and RO level are a major bottleneck for accelerating actions and responding to the demand from governments and COs respectively, including for resource mobilization. Recruitments, including for consultants, remain time consuming. In emergencies (public health or caused by natural phenomena), the role of Nutrition in general and UNICEF’s role in coordination, still need more advocacy to prevent deterioration of the situation and to avoid reputational risk. The issue was put on the radar of LACRO management, GNC and HQ (PD and EMOPS) and an advocacy plan will be designed and implemented in 2021, jointly with the Global Nutrition Cluster and others.

On system strengthening, the lesson learned is that it is important to rebuild education systems differently not only in terms of offsetting the effects of COVID-19, but to addressing pre-existing weaknesses and gaps, and build more resilient system to possible future crisis. The digital gaps need to be closed. Lessons learned from activities undertaken showed that UNICEF has a strategic role to play to assist countries in innovations in education, including in digital education, capacity development for teachers, addressing inequities, skills development, formative assessment and monitoring as well as advocacy for reopening of schools and ECD centers while ensuring learning recuperation and preventing drop out. At the regional level, what worked well was the identification and sharing of knowledge, knowledge generation and capacity development and exchange of good practices. In ECD,
UNICEF was key in responding to the needs of parents for useful, credible and relevant information to help them in providing early learning opportunities and nurturing care to their children. The early childhood services workforce required support to incorporate innovative tools and technology to ensure the continuity of services in a remote/hybrid form. COs need more KM and experience-sharing mechanisms to strengthen their work ensuring education continuity and learning outcomes.

In the area of child protection, countries in the region were able to introduce new tools to improve service access in a sustainable manner, however some struggled to adapt existing services in the face of the pandemic. The regional and global studies showed that services were closed, for example border services or counselling services for family reintegration support. In some countries, rather than adjusting the modality for doing these services, new services were introduced instead, such as helplines. This is not in all cases where some countries reinforced their hotline and helpline services, and others capitalized on the opportunity to promote alternatives to detention for those in conflict with the law. This potentially indicates a difficulty in the system to adapt existing institutional structures, but also at the same time a flexibility to incorporate new tools and services.

Another learning is that it was initially presumed that a health pandemic may curb the migration flows in the region. This did not happen as the circumstances, such as natural disasters, the covid related deterioration of the economy and loss of employment, along with the continuing violence in the communities, continued to provide impetus for families to move to other countries in the hope of better opportunities. Further with the lack of jobs and potentially limited access to health care, some also returned to their country of origin, changing patterns of migration. With the already existing xenophobia, the disinfection that Covid-19 is transmitted by ‘foreigners’ resulted in migrants facing increased risks of violence.

The pandemic illustrated the importance of effective knowledge management systems across the region to get the information quickly to inform programme implementation. Of particular importance initially was the information necessary to adjust practices to control the pandemic. Several country offices prepared specific protocols for care facilities such as for children in alternative care and in conflict with the law. It was challenging to get the required knowledge resources for the response in Spanish, and to capture in real time the programming learning.

In the area of social policy, lessons learned included that quality policy work, and/or the means to build best practice, are endeavors that could use further support and the signaling that they are valued. This is a region in which “upstream” or policy work should be an aim, as strong governments and institutions exist, and as our small budgets do not allow us to implement any intervention at a significant scale. If “downstream” work is to take place, we should have strong M&E frameworks that allow for documented lessons, and rigorous evaluation that demonstrates results or allows for lesson-learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic also significantly tested the ability of our established data collection methods. To support this, LACRO was able to innovate and to generate evidence on the situation of children in “real time” that remained robust and representative in nature. This involved the design and implementation of multi-sector, multi-country rapid telephone-based household survey. The survey was conducted between the period of June and July reaching 10,500 households across 13 countries in the region, covering indicators across health, education, nutrition, WASH, CP, and social inclusion. The results it generated were representative at the regional (60% of LAC’s population) and national levels (both for HH with children and HH without children). While not at the same level of representativeness, the survey also included a convenient sample of Venezuelan immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago, Peru, Colombia, and Brazil, which offered some, however non-robust, “real time” insights into this population of particular concern in our region.