The year under review was extremely difficult for children in the Eastern and Southern Africa region (ESAR). In addition to facing emerging and protracted conflicts, sub-regional droughts and a locust infestation, COVID-19 had a devastating impact. The pandemic stripped away more than 6 per cent of per capita growth, and with it, nearly a decade of income progress. The region experienced its first-ever economic recession, which caused the most significant increase in poverty ever recorded. Based on national definitions, poverty rates among the 0–17-year-old population are likely to have jumped by an average of 10 per cent. Thus, by end-2020 nearly half of the region’s 255 million children were experiencing monetary poverty.

Disruption in service delivery due to COVID-19 containment measures is expected to set the region back even further, reversing substantial progress achieved in maternal and child health over the past two decades—in a region where mortality among mothers, children, and new-borns remains unacceptably high. ESAR has the second-highest rates of mortality globally, after West and Central Africa. In 2019 alone, approximately 1 million children died, mostly of preventable and treatable causes; about 44 per cent died during their first month of life. Health workers across the region were also heavily affected by the pandemic, as were the region’s health systems, which were already strained by population growth, urbanization and inadequate financing and human resources (HR). There is growing evidence of disruptions in routine and supplementary immunization activities, polio outbreak response, heath prevention and promotion services, as well as the diversion of human and financial resources to the COVID-19 response.

By the end of 2019 ESAR had attained the global target of 95 per cent treatment coverage for the nearly 1 million pregnant women living with HIV, thereby averting an estimated 1.5 million new HIV infections in children since 2010. Yet lifesaving HIV treatment coverage for children and adolescents continues to trail behind. Service disruptions resulting from COVID-19 containment measures continued to threaten hard-won gains and further progress toward HIV elimination.

Some 28 million children are stunted in the region due to slow progress in stunting reduction coupled with a rapidly expanding child population. Levels of wasting remain high, particularly in eastern Africa, due to persistently poor diet, frequent population displacement and recurrent climate-related events. Overweight is an emerging issue, especially among adolescents. Overall, 42 per cent of children are either stunted, wasted or overweight, and only one in 10 children receive meals with minimum dietary diversity. An additional 25 per cent of children may fail to thrive in 2021 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a direct impact on access to food. The number of children facing acute food insecurity may have risen by 14 per cent during 2020; in April close to 20 million students lost access to free daily meals served at schools and most were affected for the remainder of the year.

The pandemic put every aspect of nurturing care—good health, adequate nutrition, early learning and stimulation, responsive caregiving, and safety and security—at risk. Caregivers became first-line responders to COVID-19 in a stressful environment lacking in appropriate support. This situation did not bode well for early childhood development (ECD) in a context where approximately two-thirds of children under the age of five are developmentally off-track due to poverty and stunting alone. Only one-third of children in ESAR are enrolled in pre-primary education, which was also affected by the pandemic.

School closures impacted around 130 million students in ESAR. Learning completely stopped for most
of them, reducing their lifelong earning potential. Even more worrisome, millions of students will end up as permanent dropouts, adding to the 40 million children out of school before the pandemic. School closures also deprived many children of a protective environment. Country reporting, although limited, validated decades of experience and research demonstrating that sexual, physical and emotional abuse rates rise when children are out of school for prolonged periods. Anecdotes of increased adolescent pregnancies were also reported.

Service disruptions and containment measures associated with COVID-19 led to increased threats to children’s and women’s safety and well-being—including gender-based violence (GBV), exploitation, abuse, neglect and social exclusion. Children were confined to their homes due to school closures and hidden from public sight. Stay-at-home orders and social distancing cut children off from the support systems they need, especially when in distress—such as school, extended family, community and social services. COVID-19 containment measures, (e.g. stay-at-home orders and border closures) also impacted children and families on the move. These families—already living in fragile communities with limited access to services due to lack of legal documentation—faced an increased risk of forced return, discrimination and xenophobia.

COVID-19 had a profoundly negative impact on women and girls, amplifying the inequalities and violence they may face every day and undermining the realization of most of the gender-relevant targets of the Sustainable Development Goals and gains made towards eliminating harmful practices against women and girls. The increased use of digital platforms for exchanging information in 2020 also posed a challenge to ensuring that women and girls’ voices and experiences were considered in programming, policy and advocacy.

In 2020 the region faced numerous humanitarian crises and emergencies. More than 57 million people required humanitarian assistance in the region, of whom an estimated 31.4 million are children. Droughts affected some 40 million people, while flooding and cyclones resulted in displacement, communicable disease outbreaks and lost livelihoods. The region witnessed one of the worst desert locust outbreaks in recent history, which destroyed crops and impacted livelihoods, worsening malnutrition in Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya and neighbouring countries. Threat of regional or sub-regional conflict loomed as the violence in Cabo Delgado intensified in Mozambique with cross-border implications with neighbouring Tanzania, and new conflict erupted in Tigray, Ethiopia, opened another humanitarian crisis front, spurring an outpouring of refugees to Sudan.

**Major contributions and drivers of results**

Support to country offices (COs) focused around the COVID-19 response, strengthening systems and resilience, and ensuring essential service continuity. ESARO delivered support through direct technical assistance, quality assurance and programme oversight. It also generated regional-level evidence for improved programming, leveraged resources with regional and global partners and used regional platforms to advocate for critical issues affecting children.

**2.1 Programme areas**

**Health**

ESARO played a pivotal role in coordinating preparedness and response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in close collaboration with WHO and other partners. Key priorities were issuing guidance on essential health service continuity, including WHO/UNFPA/UNICEF joint guidance on continuity of minimum essential maternal and new-born health services; monitoring the disruption to other essential health, HIV and nutrition services; and conducting deep dives to glean lessons to inform subsequent actions.
The health section anchored robust cross-sectoral collaboration, for example: mainstreaming mental health and psychosocial support in public health emergencies; developing guidance on safe school reopening and operations in the pandemic context; developing community scorecards for infection prevention and control and continuity of community-based health services; and collaboration on risk communication and community engagement (RCCE). Amid the challenges imposed by COVID-19, ESARO seized the opportunity to amplify the importance of community-based health care as an essential part of primary care and stress the importance of strengthening existing community systems.

**Nutrition**

ESARO supported the COVID-19 nutrition response with guidance, eLearning tools, and remote and onsite training on nutrition in emergencies, nutrition information systems, infant and young child feeding (IYCF) and management of wasting to ensure sustained provision of minimally disrupted essential country-level nutrition services. This included support for accelerated adoption of simplified approaches to wasting management made necessary by COVID-19 movement restrictions. ESARO support helped COs reach more than 1.2 million children with wasting treatment, almost 26 million mothers and caregivers with IYCF counselling and 63 million children with vitamin A supplementation, and develop emergency preparedness plans. Twelve of the region’s 21 countries are now implementing family-led mid-upper arm circumference and other simplified approaches. Planning for implementation of the global action plan for management of wasting in ESAR was also initiated. As part of the global partnership with WFP on wasting and school health and nutrition, the three focus countries (Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan) were supported to develop action plans.

**HIV**

Multi-country consultations and desk review led ESARO to rapidly develop a COVID-19 HIV response framework that focuses on continuity of services, protection and prevention, research, monitoring and documentation. ESARO provided remote technical support to countries, expanded the HIV and adolescents portfolio and used data analysis to advance the agenda for eliminating new paediatric HIV infections. COs benefited from regional partnerships, including 2gether 4 SRHR with the Government of Sweden/UNFPA/UNAIDS/WHO, that supported RCCE content, integrated monitoring of service continuity and provided new scientific evidence made relevant for programming. ESARO’s compendium of innovative approaches to HIV during COVID-19, including multi-month drug refills; adolescent-driven social media campaign on HIV and COVID-19; and a report on tailored services and support for adolescent and young mothers provided strategic direction for country programmes in the region and beyond.

**WASH**

The challenges presented by COVID-19 underlined the importance of opening new avenues of financing for WASH, leading to efforts on blended financing with the European Investment Bank (EIB) and expanding partnerships tied to the humanitarian/development nexus. ESARO expanded the KfW partnership and secured significant new resources for a multi-country UNICEF-UNHCR WASH programme. ESARO provided technical leadership for the regional infection prevention and control (IPC) working group, among others, and collaborated with regional partners, particularly the African Ministers’ Council on Water Sanitation, Water for All and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to strengthen advocacy for WASH programming. Implementation of the UNICEF-Lixil sanitation market-shaping partnership focused on strengthening regional sanitation markets. ESARO also technically supported the Africa sanitation policy guideline development; sanitation policy, monitoring and assessment tool; and SADC’s regional hygiene strategy development.

**ECD**
ESARO supported COs with a series of guidance notes to integrate ECD into COVID-19 response plans and respond to the needs of young children when opening ECD centres and early childhood education (ECE) facilities in the context of the pandemic. At the same time, ESARO’s ECD support sustained its focus on embedding nurturing care across CO programmes and increasing access to ECE and strengthening regional and global partnerships. ESARO contributed to developing an ECE framework for Africa as part of its collaboration with the African Union (AU) on ECD. ESARO also strengthened its partnership with United Nations agencies, including WHO; the World Bank (through engagement on its Early Years’ Fellowship programme and in-country human capital development projects) and with private sector foundations, such as LEGO and Conrad N. Hilton.

**Education**

ESARO’s efforts were concentrated on addressing the COVID-19-related school closures and preventing learning loss. ESARO focused on enhancing CO capacity for: COVID-19 education response planning, continuity of learning and catch-up programming on basic skills to avoid learning loss and safe school reopening advocacy. The knowledge, evidence and tools generated to support COs’ COVID-19 response included a remote learning costing tool, risk assessment tool for school reopening, operational note on safe and inclusive school enrolment, digital learning toolkit, and the Time to Teach regional research report. ESARO also supported the development of innovative COVID-19 response solutions, such as the Reimagine Your Future challenge and Better Together Africa, to engage young people in support of continuity of alternative learning/skills development. In addition, ESARO launched successful fundraising efforts with the Global Partnership for Education and others.

**Child protection**

ESARO focused on ensuring the continuity of child protection and GBV services during COVID-19, collaborating with a wide range of new and existing regional and sub-regional partners to produce technical guidance and evidence and undertake advocacy and collective action. Priority areas of CO support included: mental health and wellbeing, preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), strengthening the social service workforce, protection against GBV, addressing forced displacement and migration, violence prevention and response to harmful practices. ESARO’s support to COs resulted in, among other things: all COs strengthening PSEA actions, inclusion of GBV by 14 COs in their Humanitarian Action for Children appeals and reporting by 14 COs on GBV risk-mitigation indicators during the COVID-19 response.

**Adolescent participation and engagement**

Adolescents and youth have faced increased risks to stress, mental health challenges and loss of learning and job opportunities throughout the pandemic, yet with their entrepreneurism and innovation, were partners in UNICEF’s COVID-19 response. Use of the U-Report platform was maximized to inform, engage and collect perspectives and feedback from young people, with almost 2 million U-Reporters actively engaged. Eight regional polls on COVID-19 prevention, myth-busting and the secondary impact of COVID-19 were conducted. ESARO also supported roll-out of Your Voice, Your Future polls, in collaboration with the European Union (EU) and AU, to gain insights from adolescents and young people on climate change, skills-building, mental health and governance. A new partnership was forged with Scouts Africa on adolescent participation/engagement with a focus on climate change mitigation. The Youth Agency Marketplace (Yoma) developed with young people won the EU/GIZ smart development hackathon and has already reached more than 300,000 youth, facilitating their learning-to-earning journey. ESARO also capitalized on the increased awareness of mental health challenges triggered by COVID-19 for advocacy. For the first time, World Mental Health Week was held in the region, including a joint statement by Regional Directors on the importance of investing in
mental health and psychosocial support.

- **Social policy**

To address the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and other shocks on children, ESARO guided COs through comprehensive analysis and evidence-generation and provided technical support. ESARO closely engaged the International Monetary Fund and conducted several socio-economic impact analyses. Thirteen guidance products and studies were disseminated, including ‘COVID-19: A Catastrophe for Children in Sub-Saharan Africa’, which garnered significant global attention regarding its conclusions and call for ambitious action. ESARO developed simulation exercises for COs to understand the poverty impacts of COVID-19 and the mitigation potential of cash transfer programmes, while technical support contributed to the expansion of national programmes, including in Ethiopia, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. Trainings on public finance and humanitarian cash transfers were also organized along with 10 Outside the Social Policy Box webinar events. Throughout the year, ESARO continued to focus on strengthening regular programming partnerships, including with the International Budget Partnership, UNDP, WFP and World Bank.

2.2 **Cross-Cutting Programme Areas**

- **Communication for Development**

2020 saw a steep increase in the generation and use of social data, as well as a profusion of false information about COVID-19 (the ‘infodemic’). ESARO mapped 150 data sources to support the COVID-19 RCCE response and address the infodemic and continued to co-lead the regional RCCE technical working group, ensuring that all 21 countries had RCCE working groups and plans. Strategic tools and country guidance were developed to reinforce social listening and track rumours. Fifteen guidance documents were developed around RCCE, continuity of care, vaccine introduction, and back-to-school initiatives. ESARO generated a significant number of targeted knowledge products, including some 700 documents, to support the COVID-19 response. Strengthening communication for development (C4D) capacity in the region was sustained throughout the year: a C4D capacity development framework for ESAR was put in place and guidance for measuring social and behavioural change was developed for rollout in 2021.

- **Gender**

Gender injustices tend to be amplified in emergencies, which unfortunately was also the case during the COVID-19 emergency. ESARO seized the opportunity to establish a partnership with IFRC to analyse the integration of gender and GBV risk-mitigation in law and policies on disaster risk reduction in 10 countries in the region. ESARO also engaged with regional economic communities (RECs) and the AU to influence national plans, making gender-related interventions essential during any future crisis response. Given the digital gender gap in the region, ESARO systematically tracked the engagement of adolescent girls and young women in assessments that rely on digital platforms to ensure accurate visibility of this group.

- **Planning, monitoring, data, evaluation**

ESARO’s support focused on supporting COs to adjust their planning in response to the pandemic and find innovative ways to sustain data collection and programme monitoring considering restrictions on movement. ESARO supported real-time assessment of the COVID-19 response in 21 countries and community rapid assessments in eight countries to strengthen national RCCE responses. Despite the challenges, ESARO also collaborated with COs to ensure that quality country programme documents (CPDs) were submitted to the Executive Board and that newly designed CPDs were informed by country programme evaluations and aligned to the wider United Nations processes. Operationalization
of the regional evaluation framework contributed to enhancing the independence, credibility and quality of evaluations in the region.

Supply

ESARO contributed to the procurement of supplies worth US$609 million. Of this, 61 per cent was through UNICEF procurement services support to governments and partners; and 20 per cent was for the COVID-19 response, including PPE, diagnostics, therapeutics, oxygen products and supplies critical for IPC, continuation of essential services and school re-opening. Amid the pandemic-induced supply chain crisis, local procurement was expanded from US$77 million in 2019 to US$110 million in 2020. ESARO is supporting all countries with COVID-19 vaccine deployment under the global COVAX Facility, including country readiness assessments, development of national vaccines deployment strategies and procurement preparation.

Climate change

ESARO continued to strengthen its programming to address climate change. A key publication, ‘The climate crisis - Climate change and its impacts on children’, highlighted the extent of the crisis in the region and the rationale for engagement and ongoing interventions by governments and UNICEF to inform child-targeted climate action. UNICEF continued to work on climate-resilient development and adaptation through the promotion of climate-resilient WASH services and sustainable behaviours, as well as programming on community resilience, low-carbon footprint and renewable energy. ESARO has established new partnerships with the Development Bank of Southern Africa and submitted joint Climate Adaptation financing proposals to the Green Climate Fund, the EIB/EU green deal and KfW to provide essential financial resources for country-level climate adaptation programming for children.

Innovation

ESARO supported COs to implement innovation portfolio management approaches, increase staff capacity, including with human-centred design, and coordinate several cross-regional innovation initiatives. The Africa Data and Drone Academy (ADDA), initially launched in Malawi, provides young Africans with relevant drone and data science skills intended to enhance their professional capacity and address humanitarian and development challenges in their communities. Within three months of the inaugural course completion, 90 percent of graduates (60 per cent female) were employed in the drone industry. Finally, through GIGA, agreements to provide connectivity to schools were signed in multiple countries, with the first 100 connected in Kenya.

Humanitarian action

ESARO supported COs to prepare for and respond to various emergencies, including developing COVID-19 preparedness and response plans; ensuring minimum Ebola preparedness for countries bordering DRC; continuing services for vulnerable refugee women and children affected by conflicts in South Sudan and Burundi; and responding to intensified climatic shocks, particularly drought in the Horn of Africa and lingering impacts of Cyclone Idai. ESARO supported regional emergency response coordination for the Cabo Delgado and Tigray crises and contributed to regional/global humanitarian policy initiatives, such as the global compact on refugees and revised Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action. ESARO continued strengthening partnerships, such as the joint Blueprint Initiative with UNHCR, and the humanitarian/development nexus through support for resilience and systems strengthening.

Public-private and sub-regional partnerships

ESAR attracted a record US$1.263 billion in 2020, up from US$996 million in 2019. Through regional
dialogues and engagement with a range of key public partners, ESARO opened new avenues for funding and leveraging (e.g. climate change) and uncovered multiple strategic non-financial private sector engagements. ESARO accelerated regional mobile network operator prospecting, resulting in MOUs/advanced engagements with more than 10 companies that combine accessible online content, as well as data insights, school connectivity, child online protection and use of mobile payments. Businesses adopted family-friendly policies, with successes in the tea, tourism and banking industries, and the first wave of Business for Results trainings occurred. High-level dialogue was maintained with SADC, the East African Community (EAC), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) to identify opportunities for strengthened partnerships, resulting in memoranda of understanding with SADC and EAC.

**UN reform**

UN development system (UNDS) reform took hold at the regional level during 2020, albeit very gradually. Considerable efforts were invested in the newly formed regional collaboration platforms and ESARO is represented in all seven opportunity/issue-based coalitions of the UNDS regional coordination platform. These platforms were also utilized to coordinate the pandemic response; for example, on a harmonized approach to COVID-19 supply chain and goods movement and advocacy related to the impact of containment measures on education. With this reform actively being rolled out in countries, ESARO supported COs to ensure the alignment of CPDs with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, assisted COs to navigate the complex related dynamics and contributed to feedback to the system-wide country and regional level Mutual Accountable Frameworks. ESARO supported the update and completion of the Business Operations Strategy in countries, including the phase 1 Common Back Office in Kenya and Zimbabwe supported through frameworks of mutual recognition of services.

**Public advocacy**

ESARO carried out intense advocacy on the impacts of COVID-19, including numerous interviews and multimedia packages on the pandemic, in addition to continued attention to protracted and emerging conflicts, as well as thematic issues. Adjusting to the needs, significant advocacy work focused on school reopening and social protection. ESARO developed op-eds, regional press releases, interviews and social media packs, all suitable for CO adaptation. It also fostered and nurtured relationships with regional youth climate advocates, whose social media take-overs and co-production of content were central to climate-focused digital campaigns. UNICEF’s social media platforms again saw significant growth across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

**2.3 Internal management**

Despite extraordinary circumstances, due regional management processes took place. Two Regional Management Team (RMT) meetings were organized, providing senior regional managers a platform to discuss strategic programmatic and management issues and solutions, including as related to the COVID-19 crisis. Young UNICEF representatives raised awareness of their role in providing a unique perspective on the future of UNICEF during one of these RMT meetings and were invited to participate in other key regional initiatives.

Considering the COVID-19-related risks to staff and containment measures, many special HR steps were taken to balance duty of care for staff and accountability to stay and deliver. Existing staff development initiatives, such as the ESAR female talent initiative, were moved online, with new workshops tailored to remote participation. ESARO maintained its focus on adjusting organizational culture through a review of the 2020 Global Staff Survey and by sharing country examples of positive workplace practices. Many surge requests were met, largely remotely or through standby partner deployments. The external recruitment freeze resulted in a decline in recruitment speed and diversity in
the region, which will need to be addressed in the coming period.

ESARO supported two virtual programme budget reviews and 44 mail poll requests, as well as arranging for enterprise Governance, Risk and Compliance training in the region and analysing risk-mitigation practices. Three remote peer reviews were conducted with COs to improve internal office process effectiveness. The business continuity plan was tested, and operational support extended to staff to sustain efficient work-from-home arrangements. Security support, including capacity-building initiatives for ESARO security staff, was sustained mostly by remote means.

To better support staff during the pandemic, ESARO disseminated psycho-education material, conducted thematic workshops and provided peer support volunteer training, in addition to regular connection via all-staff meetings and other channels.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

The unprecedented experience of programming and sustaining operations during a global pandemic demanded a daunting degree of adaptation, innovation and learning on the part of every individual staff member. Sections adjusted to the new way of working while ESARO overall found ways to perform as a collective team. Mid-year and annual reviews during 2020 served as key opportunities for reflection and documenting lessons learned of these unprecedented times.

· While ESARO’s support to COs’ immediate, short-term interventions was very effective, mid- to long-term planning and preparedness for secondary impacts are equally crucial to the overall response. However, due to time pressures and the all-encompassing nature of the pandemic, preparedness for the next phase of addressing COVID-19 was not developed equally across the sectors, which will be corrected in 2021.

· The importance of having emergency preparedness plans in each section of ESARO was underlined in 2020; good practices helped the agility of response. For example, the communication section had a range of messages developed in preparation, which could be used swiftly to suit different occasions. Practice drills of what-to-do-when also contributed to a swift response. Ready-made emergency tools and familiar standard operating procedures were also crucial for a quick and coherent response. A coherent, office-wide emergency preparedness narrative and strategy are needed, along with updated guidance, SOPs and tools.

· ESARO gained some vital lessons from its Real-Time Assessment of COVID-19 response at the country-level. It has highlighted the need to strengthen preparedness and emergency response; the need for more flexible funding; the need to simplify procedures to make new partnerships easy to establish in emergencies; the need to continue innovations; and the need to improve data availability on vulnerable populations.

· The lessons that emerged in 2020 are valued by ESARO and must be embedded in specific actions. An office-wide strategy is needed to allow continuous learning about performance. Equally, a knowledge management strategy, particularly for emergency response, is called for. The momentum and flexibility behind ESARO’s achievements in 2020 are celebrated and need to be maintained, while analysis of both structural and procedural changes will be undertaken to understand precisely which elements contributed to which aspects of success.

· The pandemic necessitated several changes in business practices, such as streamlined processes within ESARO and reduced and targeted communication with COs. Some of these changes have emerged as good practices and should be continued as the world recovers from this crisis. New ways
of working experienced need to be embedded in ESARO’s culture and behaviour, with frequent feedback to retain relevance and agility.

· The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the criticality of supply chains to the world and created momentum to optimize and strengthen supply chain systems. ESARO will accelerate these activities in the region, which are critical for the planned COVAX implementation and emergency preparedness for the future.

· The challenges faced in 2020 demonstrated the importance of local partners, especially since many international organizations were unable to maintain a field presence in this hour of crisis. ESARO needs to work with COs to invest in identifying and building the capacity of local partners and finding alternative ways to deliver results.

· The importance of partnerships was highlighted in the context of the COVID-19. Trusted existing relationships were strengthened and mobilized, while new partnerships were identified and galvanized, for example with the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, which emerged as a critical pandemic response partner.

· Finally, clear lessons were learned on the importance of mobilizing and leveraging the political support of regional and sub-regional organizations, and influencers. Ties were strengthened with the AU and RECs, which had significant influence on national policies, including on school reopening and cross-border movement of people and goods. Advocacy for reopening schools also mobilized joint actions among the Regional Directors of WHO, UNICEF and UNESCO, while UNDS coordination platforms were utilized to coordinate the United Nation’s response to dual crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and multiple sub-regional conflicts.