Humanitarian needs grew exponentially in 2020. By the end of the year, 235 million people – 1 in 33 people worldwide – were in need of humanitarian assistance and protection. That represents a significant increase from the 1 in 45 people in need one year ago, which was already the highest figure in decades.

Prolonged and violent conflict remained key drivers of humanitarian need across the globe. In 2020, violence escalated in the Central Sahel, Cabo Delgado (Mozambique), South Sudan, the Sudan, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Yemen; and new conflicts broke out in places such as Nagorno Karabakh (conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan) and Ethiopia. The impacts of armed conflict and violence are particularly devastating for children. Attacks on schools and medical facilities prevent children from accessing education and interrupt vital health services. In conflict settings around the world, women and girls face heightened risk of conflict-related sexual violence.

Population displacements are expected to persist and Internally Displaced People (IDPs), returnees and host communities continue to be the most vulnerable. Half of all refugees are children under age 18, many of whom are crossing borders unaccompanied or separated from their families.

Against this backdrop, the COVID-19 pandemic generated the most widespread humanitarian, socioeconomic and human/child rights crisis that the world has ever seen. The crisis has strained already overburdened social and health service delivery systems; left millions of children out of school; contributed to rising rates of violence against children; undermined access to vital WASH resources; heightened vulnerabilities for children on the move; and eroded hard-won advances in global development. The pandemic hit marginalized and poor households hard, making it difficult for them to meet their most basic needs. The number of children living in multidimensional poverty soared to approximately 1.2 billion in 2020. This is a 15 per cent increase in the number of children living in deprivation in low- and middle-income countries, or an additional 150 million children since the pandemic began.

Ongoing conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic also deepened an already severe hunger crisis. By the end of 2020, the number of acutely food insecure people reached an estimated 270 million – an 82 per cent increase since the outbreak of COVID-19. In addition, over the past 30 years, the number of climate-related disasters – from severe drought to flooding – has tripled. In East Asia, the Mekong region was hit by more than four storms in just one month in 2020.

In this context, EMOPS coordinated UNICEF’s global humanitarian action. The Division led the organization’s efforts to prepare for and respond to humanitarian crisis; prevent and respond to the most serious protection risks and violations facing children; strengthen and expand its leadership and partnerships for child-focused humanitarian action; manage the safety and security of UNICEF personnel, premises and assets in the field; and strengthen field-based humanitarian coordination mechanisms.

In 2020, insecurity and humanitarian access continue to hamper the movement of humanitarian personnel and endanger their safety. To support UNICEF to establish and maintain humanitarian access to children and communities living in hard-to-reach areas, EMOPS continued to provide direct...
field support to priority countries; to work with country offices to innovate for humanitarian access; and to pilot new resources through the Access Field Manual.

EMOPS also helped UNICEF country offices stay and deliver in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic by conducting “light” programme criticality assessments in more than 30 countries. These exercises helped country office teams weigh the criticality of their programmes against pandemic-related risks and ensure the continuation of the most crucial and life-saving assistance and services.

In order to strengthen UNICEF’s strategic position, resources and materials on humanitarian cash transfers, in 2020, EMOPS contributed to the roll out of an organization-wide capacity building strategy on humanitarian cash transfers and a full package of related training materials. Five regional offices and four country offices (219 UNICEF staff) received a five-day online training on humanitarian cash transfers and an e-learning module was launched for all UNICEF staff and partners. The trainings will enhance cash expertise across functions (programme, finance, procurement and management) at the country, regional and headquarters levels.

EMOPS provided countries with direct technical assistance throughout the year to support the initiation, scale up and coordination of humanitarian cash programmes. For example, Burkina Faso received support to design and implement its first humanitarian cash transfer project in response to the critical humanitarian crisis, volatile insecurity and rising displacements.

In 2020, EMOPS strengthened systems and practices related to AAP in 15 countries affected by emergencies. UNICEF staff also gained knowledge and capacity on AAP with the publication of ‘Accountability to Affected Populations: A handbook for UNICEF and partners’ and the roll out of an e-learning package and a comprehensive training programme.

For example, in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, EMOPS supported the education sector with mechanisms (i.e., focus group discussions, satisfaction survey questionnaires, hotlines and a dedicated email address) that will facilitate feedback on the distribution of school kits and the quality and relevance of services for internally displaced persons and people on the move. In parallel, 138 UNICEF staff and 173 partner staff gained knowledge and capacities on AAP through targeted training; and 61 organizations involved in the development of the 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan received guidance on strengthening AAP.

At the country level, EMOPS worked with UNICEF Afghanistan and UNICEF Libya to influence the Security Council to adopt resolutions with stronger child protection language and mandates. In Afghanistan, Resolution 2543 calls to engage with all partners to conflict to undertake specific commitments and measures to end and prevent violations and abuses against children. In Libya, for the first time, Resolution 2542, has now outlined Children and Armed Conflict Responsibilities and called for the appointment of a Child Protection Advisor. In both countries, these resolutions will lead to stronger protection for children affected by armed conflict.

The humanitarian review process initiated by EMOPS in 2019 was finalized in 2020 and the recommendations were endorsed by UNICEF’s senior management. The review involved an organizational re-thinking of UNICEF’s configuration and capacity for humanitarian action, including the commitment to strengthening the linkages with its development programming.

EMOPS continued to strengthen its global preparedness architecture to improve country offices’ readiness to respond to emergencies. The Emergency Preparedness Platform and the Procedure on Preparedness for Emergency Response were updated to better meet the organization’s needs and address operational challenges. This update included revising minimum preparedness standards; aligning with the revised CCCs; and adding user-friendly features. EMOPS also supported 48 country offices in medium- and high-risk contexts to strengthen the quality of their preparedness/contingency plans for responding to humanitarian risks.

Country level preparedness was enhanced through two pilot emergency preparedness funding mechanisms – the First Action Initiative and the Co-Funding Initiative. EMOPS made four First Action Initiative allocations in 2020 – the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kenya, Nicaragua and West Africa Coastal Countries (Côte d’Ivoire, Benin, Ghana, Guinea and Togo). It is estimated that these allocations, along with five allocations made in 2019, will improve the speed of UNICEF’s emergency response by an average of 30 days, enable 66 per cent in savings per investment and reduce UNICEF’s carbon footprint by more than 200 metric tons.

UNICEF’s ability to analyse risks was enhanced with the development of new technology solutions. EMOPS rolled out automated online dashboards that aggregate the risk data flowing from the EMOPS Horizon Scan and quickly identify countries in need of emergency preparedness support. In Nicaragua, the Horizon Scan dashboard identified the specific rivers at risk of flooding before Hurricane Etna struck, which gave UNICEF the information it needed to take life-saving preparedness actions ahead of time. In addition, analytical context briefs combining quantitative data with qualitative analysis produced through the Horizon Scan process improved UNICEF’s understanding of potential future directions in high-risk situations – for example in Côte d’Ivoire and the United Republic of Tanzania.

With the scale of humanitarian needs fast outpacing the ability of traditional actors to respond, in line with the Agenda for Humanity it is more important than ever to engage all actors in humanitarian action and to build resilient societies. In 2020, EMOPS support UNICEF investment in preparedness and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) through several partnership initiatives such as the Business and Community Resilience approach aiming to engage with business in humanitarian action and resilience. In 2020, EMOPS and the Division of Private Fundraising and Partnerships supported Indonesia Country Office in fostering public-private engagement on emergency preparedness and
EMOPS continued to provide timely and efficient support to UNICEF country and regional offices to facilitate effective response to crises in 2020. This support took on global dimensions in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic response covering 153 countries and territories and with dedicated HFSS staff supporting the COVID-19 Secretariat in terms of coordination, supply and funding issues. This included four large-scale emergencies designated as UNICEF Level 3 emergencies and three Level 2 emergencies. EMOPS was also instrumental to scaling up UNICEF’s support and response to new emergencies, including in Ethiopia, Cabo Delgado (Mozambique) and Nagorno-Karabakh (conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan) as well as continued support to crises in Afghanistan, Sudan, Libya, DPRK, and Bangladesh.

In 2020, the UNICEF ERT – which is coordinated by EMOPS – expanded to 23 staff across multiple sectors. The ERT undertook 48 missions to 25 country offices totalling 2,645 days. Seventy-nine per cent of these missions (2,091 days) supported UNICEF’s response in Level 2 and Level 3 crises.

The nine EMOPS-based ERT members undertook 13 missions in 12 countries totalling 508 days of surge support for emergency response and capacity building in the field. For example, in the Sudan, EMOPS supported UNICEF’s response to the catastrophic floods by deploying an ERT member to fill the vital role of deputy representative and advocating for increased global humanitarian thematic funding allocations to the response. These funds (US$300,000) enabled the provision of life-saving WASH assistance to vulnerable displaced persons.

UNICEF released its new Policy and Framework for Humanitarian Action, the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian action in October 2020 with dedicated support from EMOPS. The new CCCs equip UNICEF and its partners with a more robust accountability framework to implement principled, timely, predictable and efficient humanitarian response and advocacy in line with international norms and standards. They include new corporate commitments on critical areas of work that have emerged in the past decade, including preparedness, quality of programmes, linking humanitarian and development programming, community engagement, gender, AAP, public health emergencies and population movement. The new CCCs will guide and shape the organization’s humanitarian response and partnerships in every country and crisis situation. They have been promoted through a rollout targeting all UNICEF personnel, leaders and managers, all UNICEF humanitarian partners, private sector, donors, and member states.

Enhancing the capacities of UNICEF staff and leadership on humanitarian action remained a key priority for EMOPS in 2020. Through the new Humanitarian Leadership Workshop, EMOPS strengthened the leadership capacities of 19 UNICEF senior field managers from country offices around the world, including Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Eritrea, Mali, South Sudan and the State of Palestine. EMOPS also oversaw a knowledge sharing event for 50 regional emergency advisors, which has enhanced the effectiveness of that role; and trained 74 national staff with fundamental skills essential to delivering humanitarian response at the local level.

The capacities of staff, managers and partners to deliver timely and quality humanitarian response...
was also improved with the launch of the UNICEF CCC Learning Strategy. During the year more than 1,250 participants received tools that will improve their ability to deliver results for children in line with the revised CCCs.

**In 2020, EMOPS accelerated efforts to improve evidence and analysis for humanitarian action** with the launch of revised CCCs related to humanitarian assessment, planning, monitoring and evaluation. EMOPS also developed resources to help country offices navigate the revised commitments. Together, these resources responded to previous reviews and evaluations that called for greater focus on quality and equity. They also highlighted needs-based planning and linkages with preparedness and AAP priorities.

EMOPS also established innovative approaches to evidence and analysis in that helped the organization respond more effectively to the COVID-19 crisis. The global COVID-19 reporting system provided a data collection portal, online data analytics dashboard, data cleaning technology and the option of generating a monthly situation report. Some 120 countries used the system consistently during the COVID-19 response, utilizing the data collection and situation report features and producing dashboards that enabled real-time programme oversight and donor reporting at the country, regional and headquarters levels.

Significant remote and in-person support for evidence and analysis was also provided during the year, including to country offices responding to the COVID-19 crisis, instability in the Central Sahel and the Ebola outbreaks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, EMOPS worked with third-party monitors and the Social Science Analysis Cell to generate evidence including social science insights and community feedback that was used to systematically review UNICEF and partner programmes, maximize their relevance and effectiveness and remain accountable to affected populations.

Strong humanitarian partnerships are central to UNICEF’s ability to reach children with life-saving assistance in emergencies. In 2020, EMOPS continued to facilitate partnerships as an integral part of its contributions to UNICEF humanitarian action.

In 2020, EMOPS supported the launch of the UNHCR-UNICEF Blueprint for Joint Action for Refugee Children, an ambitious initiative supporting the governments of 10 countries – Bangladesh, Cameroon, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Honduras, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Rwanda – to reach more than 10 million refugee and host children with essential education, WASH and child protection services. By modelling an innovative, effective and efficient collaboration, the Blueprint contributes directly to United Nations reform.

For example, in Ethiopia, the third-largest refugee hosting country in Africa, where nearly 803,000 people are registered as refugees and asylum-seekers, UNICEF and UNHCR negotiated a tripartite agreement with the Government that sets out an inclusive, nationally-led approach to supporting refugees. As a result, both agencies have gained greater access to refugee camps and cooperation among the three entities has improved.
EMOPS also strengthened UNICEF’s humanitarian collaboration with IFRC and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). With IFRC, EMOPS developed comprehensive guidance on partnering and working with civil society; and expanded its mapping of the global IFRC-UNICEF Partnership Analysis. In the lead up to the 2021 UNICEF-IOM Strategic Dialogue, EMOPS and the IOM Department of Operations and Emergencies convened a joint technical consultation to take stock of the organizations’ collaboration in humanitarian crises, and identify priorities for strengthening cooperation in 2021.

Humanitarian partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continued to progress in 2020. The second Annual Consultation with NGOs in Humanitarian Action – co-convened by EMOPS and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies – was attended by over 489 participants from 90 countries; including 324 representatives of civil society. The conference reported on progress made on specific issues since the 2019 consultations, and enabled discussion on new topics such as decolonization of aid and anti-discrimination/anti-racism. In addition, EMOPS convened a webinar series for more than 261 NGO partners (880 participants) on critical thematic and operational and strategies for responding to COVID-19.

In close partnership with the Private Fundraising and Partnerships Division, EMOPS also continued to engage with private sector actors (e.g., Microsoft, Lego, Johnson & Johnson) and multi-stakeholder platforms (e.g., the Global Humanitarian Action Executive Alliance).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the standby partnership mechanism managed by EMOPS remained the main provider of surge support for UNICEF during emergencies. In 2020, 22 standby partners provided UNICEF with 29,782 days of support, the equivalent of approximately US$14.89 million of in-kind contributions.

A total of 184 deployments were undertaken during the year to 48 country, regional and headquarters offices, including 152 standby personnel and 32 RRT missions to support UNICEF’s cluster, programme and operational commitments. The highest number of deployments supported the COVID-19 pandemic (45 deployments), followed by the crises in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (15) and South Sudan (12). Standby partners provided a range of expertise, including in climate resilience, energy, youth and adolescent education, child protection, water engineering and base camp construction.

EMOPS revitalized partnerships with the private sector for external surge deployment. For example, after the Beirut explosion, a team of 5 VEOLIA engineers were deployed to support the Lebanese water utility with assessment, leakage detection and repairs. At the end of their 5-week mission, 200 water points had been investigated and 71 leakages had been detected and repaired, saving more than 110 cubic metres of water per hour for the population of Beirut.

While security support to the field was constrained in 2020 due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions, EMOPS provided real-time remote/virtual security support to country offices facing
complex security incidents and crises. This included policy advice on security risk management and support for the development of security plans and local cost-share security budgets. For example, in Tigray (Ethiopia), Cabo Delgado (Mozambique) and the Niger, EMOPS provided location-specific security risk management guidance that enabled programme delivery for children in insecure contexts.

Investments in learning remained critical to building the security capacities of personnel, including managers, in 2020. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, 83 security focal points and chiefs of field offices participated in virtual webinars on their specific security responsibilities and accountabilities. In addition, 140 women personnel participated in seven Women’s Security Awareness Trainings, which address security threats as they relate to women and provide practical tools for managing security risks.

The UNICEF Operations Centre (OPSCEN) continued to provide 24/7 organizational business continuity – even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic – by sustaining its operational support to UNICEF staff and offices globally. UNICEF’s investments in remote support in 2019 – including offsite simulations, testing systems and equipment – were instrumental to OPSCEN’s ability to respond in the context of COVID-19 in 2020. OPSCEN was a telework-ready environment, allowing for a swift and smooth shift to remote working arrangements, with continued information and communication services.

OPSCEN continued to support UNICEF decision making by facilitating timely and effective global situational awareness of security and humanitarian crises, including key developments in the COVID-19 pandemic. This was achieved through the production and dissemination of nearly 1,600 information reports and over 600 key daily media briefs/summaries of key political, security, emergency/humanitarian or socio-economic events. This was in addition to nearly 1,000 real-time advisories and alerts for breaking situations, including security events in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Mali and Somalia; the WHO declaration of the global COVID-19 pandemic; and the explosion in Beirut.

In 2020, the Central Investment Fund disbursed US$3 million to 85 country offices across seven regions to facilitate compliance with safety and security standards in various areas of UNICEF operations. The funds were used to purchase key security equipment and enhance the security of UNICEF office premises and operations. For example, UNICEF Somalia received US$100,000 to install a fortified bunker at the Baidoa Field Office that will protect against explosive threats.

EmOPS continued to support UNICEF’s role as cluster lead agency of the Nutrition and WASH Clusters and the Child Protection AoR and as co-lead of the Education Cluster

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Implementing the recommendations of the humanitarian review

The recommendations of the humanitarian review reflect UNICEF’s current challenges and its desired
end states. Collectively they will help the organization become more agile, more able to fulfil its dual mandate and, most importantly, better able to meet the needs of all crisis-affected children. EMOPS will support UNICEF to implement these recommendations, which provide specific steps for strengthening the organization’s humanitarian action, preparing for future emergencies, strengthening humanitarian leadership, building capacities for humanitarian action, strengthening surge mechanisms, strengthening the linkages between humanitarian, development and peace programming, improving risk management, improving humanitarian access and increasing AAP.

**Continuing humanitarian action in the context of COVID-19**

COVID-19-related restrictions negatively impacted UNICEF’s emergency programmes and the number of children that the organization was able to reach in complex humanitarian crises. Across its sections, EMOPS’ ability to support UNICEF humanitarian action was constrained by hiring limitations, the reprioritization of work and the dislocation of working arrangements; even while demand for support rose exponentially. EMOPS is adapting to the new way of working in the context of the pandemic.

**Adapting to address limitations on in-person surge deployments**

COVID-19-related restrictions significantly impacted in-country surge support to ongoing humanitarian operations. In particular, internal missions were greatly constrained by the global nature of the emergency. EMOPS responded by establishing remote deployments, including a new legal framework with external Standby Partners for remote deployments. EMOPS also rolled out a surge protocol for internal and external surge to address the travel constraints and be able to responsibly deploy in 2020. This experience yielded important lessons. First, remote support is a viable alternative modality when physical deployments or travel are not possible when the surge request is initiated/underway. Second, remote deployment is most effective when the support is targeted and well-defined. Third, rapid adaptions and strong duty of care allowed UNICEF to secure the largest amount of in-kind support from Standby Partners of any UN agency.

**Responding in insecure contexts with limited humanitarian access**

In several contexts where UNICEF operates, insecurity and limited humanitarian access have hampered the movement of humanitarian personnel and endangered their safety. At the same time, in many countries, COVID-19-related restrictions imposed on international travel have limited the ability of UNICEF and partners to implement and monitor programmes. EMOPS will support UNICEF to continue to stay and deliver to sustain humanitarian interventions and identify innovative ways of adapting and scaling programming, including through remote implementation and monitoring.

**Strengthening UNICEF’s procedures for emergency response**

UNICEF is currently revising its emergency procedures, drawing on lessons from the COVID-19 response and in line with the revised CCCs and the humanitarian review recommendations. EMOPS is supporting this process to ensure that the new procedures make the organization more predictable, timely and efficient in its humanitarian coordination, response and advocacy. They will include a minimum package of actions to be taken in emergencies for key areas such as protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, humanitarian access and AAP; and be auditable to ensure a more predictable and accountable response.

**Prioritizing preparedness and risk analysis in humanitarian action**

UNICEF needs to more systematically integrate emergency preparedness into its regular planning processes and actions. EMOPS is therefore supporting new funding structures such as the First Action Initiative, anticipatory action and other trigger-related funding; and strengthening UNICEF’s preparedness for global catastrophic risk, beginning with a review of the organization’s readiness to effectively respond to a range of events. To advance the organization’s ability to analyse risk, EMOPS
is developing data-driven online tools for determining baseline risk and emerging dynamic hazards.

**Meeting increased demand for cluster coordination support**

The number of countries requesting support to establish or strengthen sectoral/cluster coordination increased significantly in 2020. At the same time, COVID-19-related restrictions on movement made in-country deployments extremely difficult. Despite funding gaps, EMOPS responded by reprioritizing planned cluster coordination activities and redirecting resources towards RRT and Helpdesk support. This included major shifts to remote/online modalities, which, while they limited vital in-person engagement and field visits and posed significant technical challenges, also accelerated the adoption of more efficient and effective support tools and modalities. In 2021 and beyond, EMOPS will work to maximize the cost efficiencies of remote/online infrastructure for humanitarian coordination in collaboration with partners.

**Improving accountability to affected people through strong feedback mechanisms**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of having strong complaint and feedback mechanisms in place to listen to and engage with affected populations. However, integrating these mechanisms into UNICEF programmes has remained challenging. In 2021, EMOPS will continue to prioritize supporting country offices to establish these mechanisms and ensure that systematic engagement with affected people guides evidence-based decision making in all of its programming.

**Research and evidence-based planning**

UNICEF have led the setup of the first multi-actor platform for operational social sciences analytics to accompany outbreak response in partnership with epidemiological analyses. This innovative approach to use real-time Integrated and Multidisciplinary Outbreak Analytics (IMOA) was demonstrated successful through the 58 studies and 112 co-developed recommendations during the 10th Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2018-2020).

The Social Sciences Analytics Cell (CASS) seeks to use evidence to advocate for more accountable, effective and efficient response strategies and interventions. The CASS is an operational research unit that provides real time integrated analysis to influence decision-making of response actors involved in the response to epidemics.

**Development of a global Humanitarian Cash Transfer Management Information System (HCT MIS)**

A data team in EMOPS has been set-up to fast track the development of a global Humanitarian Cash Transfer Management Information System (HCT MIS) – HOPE (Humanitarian cash Operations and Programme Ecosystem). This system is intended to ensure adequate quality assurance and risk mitigation measures in programmes with a humanitarian cash transfer component and to safely store and exchange data with UNICEF partners. The EMOPS cash team worked jointly with UNHCR to integrate UNHCR’s Payment Management software (Cash Assist) into the HCT MIS ecosystem for the payment management function.