

## Cuba

### Update on the context and situation of children

Cuba is facing its worst economic crisis in recent years, marked by an acute shortage of food, medications, raw materials and other critical supplies. Between 2020 and 2021, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 13 per cent. Inflation, estimated at 70 per cent, has aggravating effects related to the loss of purchasing power and the failure to satisfy basic needs in low-income households. There is no empirical evidence available regarding the specific effects of the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic on the situation of children. However, the compensatory measures to counter inflation and welfare measures reaching about 400,000 people at a cost exceeding 400 million Cuban pesos include the delivery of resources, services and monetary benefits to the most vulnerable. Protests against the shortages and demonstrations against the government spread through several territories and led to civil disturbances, prompting the intervention of the authorities and causing clashes and arrests. The government stated that no child under 16 was incarcerated in response to accusations of alleged arrests of children. After the incidents, the Government promoted debate and the participation of citizens in social projects and executed projects for direct attention to the vulnerable population. In some provinces, the rise in COVID-19 infections reached more than 2,000 daily cases for several weeks, causing a health crisis in the middle of the year. The public healthcare system came under intense pressure between July and September due to the growing demand for beds and facilities in intensive care units and medical supplies, personal protective equipment, antibiotics, and medicinal oxygen. The authorities established a management centre to operate and transport oxygen supplies throughout the country with the support of the armed forces. UNICEF Cuba acquired a medical oxygen plant, installed at a local hospital to ensure health coverage to 85 per cent of the population in occidental provinces. Since the pandemic's beginning, the country reported 964,176 cases of COVID-19 and 8,315 deaths, representing a death rate of 0.86 per cent and a recovery rate of 99.1 per cent. The epidemiological worsening and the increase in the number of in-household infections led to the rise in cases among children, with an average of 1,600 daily cases for several weeks. 176,456 children have been diagnosed, including 11,698 children under one year of age. With a survival rate of 99.9 per cent, official figures report 19 child deaths from COVID-19. The infant mortality rate rose to 7.5 deaths per 1,000 live births after having remained below 5 for several years. The leading causes of death were premature births, low weight at birth and retarded intrauterine growth. In 2021, 207 more deaths were reported than in 2020, while there were 5,747 fewer births. The low weight at birth rate rose to 6.5 per cent. It was a health issue in all provinces, associated with the cause of death in 17 per cent of deaths of children under one year of age. 4.4 per cent of pregnant women obtained a poor nutritional evaluation at the beginning of pregnancy. The maternal mortality rate experienced a marked rise to 182.9 deaths per 100,000 live births. Despite Cuba maintaining prenatal, childbirth and postpartum care as a top priority, in 2021, 171 deaths were reported (130 more than in 2020), 54 per cent of them caused by COVID-19. Vaccination coverage with DPT3 reached 99.4 per cent. Cuba maintained the National Immunization Program, administering four million 800 thousand doses of 11 vaccines to prevent 13 diseases, representing a vaccination coverage of 95 per cent. Nationally produced anti-COVID-19 vaccines: Soberana 02, Soberana Plus and Abdala are in process for Emergency Use by WHO. Documentation submitted to WHO and exchange with Cuban authorities is ongoing. By December, 87.6 per cent of the population had been vaccinated with the complete series. Booster shots had been administered to 846,248 people. Between September and the end of December, 81.3 per cent of children over two years of age had been immunized. Due to the worsening of the epidemiological situation, in-person classes were interrupted in most schools between January and October, and 82.5 per cent of children between 6 and 18 years of age received lessons at home. Studies on the effects of

isolation showed various types of adaptive behaviors and symptoms of psychological discomfort in children. The most frequently reported are over-attachment to the primary caregiver, altered sleeping times, irritable behavior, rebellious/defiant behavior, and overconsumption of technology. Children between 4 and 11 years were the most affected group. Approximately 80 per cent of children in sampled population showed resistance to study. In November, with the advance of vaccination in children and the improvement of the epidemiological situation, the country reopened schools and resumed in-person classes for all schooling levels. The legislative timetable derived from the adoption of the new Constitution of the Republic in 2019 advanced with the recognition of new guarantees for the rights of women and children on the subjects of maternity, prenatal and postnatal health care, breastfeeding, paternal responsibility of care, and prevention of and attention to gender-based violence and family violence. The draft bill of the Family Code was approved for a vote. The text is based on principles of family plurality, diversity and non-discrimination; it adopts international standards from the Convention on the Rights of the Child and takes into account the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The new law also includes objectives from the Sustainable Development Goals, the ending all forms of violence against children and adolescents, and the related to the promotion of the social inclusion of all people, regardless of their age, gender, ability or other conditions. During the 2021 hurricane season, the third most active in recorded history in the Atlantic, Cuba was affected by the Tropical Storms Elsa and Fred and Hurricane Ida. The most significant damage was agriculture, housing and the electricity infrastructure (fallen electricity pylons). UNICEF Cuba supported the recovery of 12 affected schools in the western provinces.

## Major contributions and drivers of results

The first nine months of the year were critical. They showed alarming levels of transmission of COVID-19 throughout the country, forcing the adoption of preventive measures, including social isolation and remote working. At the end of the first semester, medical authorities approved the use of a national vaccine, launching a national vaccination campaign. UNICEF Cuba responded to the government's call by reprogramming regular resources, using resources from the ACT-A vaccines pillar and support received from UNICEF-Spain Committee, governments of the Republic of Korea, Canada and Japan. Resource mobilization grew by four times the annual previous budget.

As part of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, 1.3 million syringes were delivered throughout the country, and 135 vaccination centres received cold chain related supplies. During the third trimester, UNICEF received support from the Government of Japan to strengthen the cold chain and consolidate vaccination process.

UNICEF Cuba supported COVID-19 diagnosis with PCR tests for 14,304 people. The promotion of continuity of services, benefited 10,000 people with medicines essential for the treatment of COVID-19 in 15 provinces and the special municipality of Isla de la Juventud. At the height of the pandemic, UNICEF Cuba worked closely with the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Investment and other bodies, to supply and start up a medicinal oxygen plant to address complications from COVID-19. It provided medical services to 85 per cent of the population in La Habana, Artemisa and Pinar del Río (2.7 million people). Sixteen pediatric healthcare centres strengthened their medical services by offering oxygen therapy, and 10 other mother-and-child healthcare institutions improved their hygiene conditions.

UNICEF Cuba acquired 116,000 doses of the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine, which the country does not produce, thus reaching 100 per cent of one year old children (51,864 girls, 64,136 boys) and maintaining effective coverage of the Expanded Vaccination Program.

A total of 135,685 people (58,334 women, 11,775 girls and 12,309 boys) from the 15 municipalities of the capital – including the 4 territories with the greatest difficulties with water supply – received containers of various sizes for water storage. 18,875 people (8,115 women, 1,638 girls and 1,712 boys)

received basic hygiene kits, to improve hygiene conditions in response to COVID-19. A total of 481 health-care centres received 7,500 water storage containers.

Projects to create or strengthen protective environments for children and adolescents in Havana and Granma intervened in 23 urban and rural communities, reaching 400,743 people, who are now better prepared to prevent and deal with violence situations. A total of 258 community agents (154 women and 104 men) learned about the manifestations of violence against children and adolescents and the social myths underpinning such violence, thus reinforcing their knowledge of protective environments.

The 'Mídete' campaign shared messages on violence against children that reached 559,969 people through posts on social media, and 383 people participated in 16 workshops. The campaign promoted the study of digital consumption by Cuban adolescents and local actors, and identified favorable spaces in the provinces of Granma, Villa Clara and Pinar del Río for the implementation of prevention and awareness-raising activities related to different types of violence affecting children and adolescents. Further, messages on the prevention of gender-based violence promoted by the campaign reached 4,517 adolescents, 2,393 females, through workshops and other communication and cultural initiatives. A study was conducted, as part of the campaign to generate evidence, to look at the interconnection between gender based violence and violence against children in Cuba.

About 5,000 people (mothers, fathers and caregivers), were reached through the multi-platform project 'Crianza Respetuosa' ('Respectful Parenting'). The platform provided resources to families on positive parenting, prevention of violence at home, mental health of children and adolescents and their caregivers, and responsible use of technology, among other topics requested by the beneficiaries of these services.

Through its digital platforms, UNICEF Cuba reached 2.5 million of people with comprehensive mother-and-child health topics such as prevention of overweight and obesity, breastfeeding, feeding of children of up to two years of age, nutrition for pregnant women and lactating mothers, vaccination, road safety education. Comprehensive health promotion messages were disseminated through an alliance between entities of Ministry of Health, reaching 66,235 adolescents.

UNICEF Cuba supported services, for children and adolescents who have committed acts classified as crimes, at the integral education schools run by the Ministry of the Interior. Monitoring the situation of adolescents involved in legal processes triggered by the protests that occurred in July in several parts of the country remains a challenge, which it become the focus of national and international public interest.

Country Office supported training on the application of regulatory changes in Cuba that impact the rights of children and adolescents. About 300 legal professionals were trained in specialized child protection with a gender approach in two certificated courses; and 463 researchers from 16 national institutions exchanged experiences and good practices for the prevention of violence.

With technical assistance from UNICEF Cuba, the Counselling Office of the Centro A+ Adolescent Spaces reached 14,811 people through digital channels with psychological and self-care tools. Additionally, 1,882 children received recreational resources delivered to pediatric wards, to contribute to their psycho-emotional well-being following hospitalization due to COVID-19. The Center for Studies on Psychological Well-Being provided a specialized psychological response in violence situations for 188 girls and boys. Other 6,000 people, including workers and children at homes for children without family protection, received personal protective equipment to prevent COVID-19 transmission.

The partnerships between different programme components strengthened the integrated approach of

the Every Child Learns component, which includes responsible parenting, inclusive education and quality education in early childhood as part of the actions for home learning and the reopening of schools. As a result, 2,913 education agents, teachers and families were trained directly on home learning, handling stress at home, preventing COVID-19, the vaccination process for children, and the reopening of schools.

UNICEF Cuba acquired audiovisual equipment that will make digital platforms for educational activities and the production of materials and multimedia products freely accessible, to support the Ministry of Education, benefiting more than 1.6 million students at all levels of education. Within the logistical support for the reopening of schools, more than 45,000 students from 848 educational centres returned to a safe environment with infrared thermometers to carry out temperature checks, as part of the response to COVID-19.

Social media reached more than 1.2 million people, 5,312 of them directly through educational support multi-platform projects, such as: the campaigns ‘Hogares Alertas/Hogares Seguros’ (‘Alert Homes/Safe Homes’), ‘Con amor aprender mejor’ (‘With Love Learn Better’) and ‘Con amor, de regreso a clases’ (‘Back to School with Love’), devised and supported with a comprehensive approach by all UNICEF Cuba’s programme components and their respective projects.

UNICEF Cuba and the Ministry of Education provided training for more than 8,042 education agents for early childhood in all of the country’s provinces and 5,934 fathers and professionals of educational sector on responsible parenting and quality education in early childhood.

In partnership with the Central Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, more than 1,150 teachers, families, specialists and students training in pedagogical subjects received educational and socio-emotional support through the multi-platform projects ‘Muestrales el camino’ (‘Show Them the Way’) and ‘Juntos por la Inclusión’ (‘Together for Inclusion’), which run six WhatsApp groups, two Telegram groups and two resources channels on Telegram. 989,456 people were reached through social media with home learning capsules for children with intellectual disabilities and/or autism. Producing 15 materials improved inclusive educations.

New study plans in vocational schools are being implemented, along with professional practice workshops and Communication for Development actions, linked in several issues with the Unicef Framework on skills development. These workshops were attended by 1,053 teachers and students (403 girls and 650 boys, including 73 with some form of disability) from 13 vocational schools in Santiago de Cuba, Camagüey, Las Tunas and La Habana.

Forty-six Cuban journalists raised their awareness and level of understanding of children’s rights, as well as of the role of UNICEF in supporting Cuba’s cooperation programme through their participation in a training course on climate change, disaster risk reduction and media coverage on children’s issues organized jointly with the International Institute of Journalism.

UNICEF Cuba supported consolidation of the community manual for inclusive management of disaster risk reduction in collaboration with the National Staff of Civil Defense, the Ministry of Education, the Central Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, Oxfam and Humanity & Inclusion.

UNICEF Cuba strengthened dialogue with national and sectoral authorities to identify priorities for a timely response to different risks as part of emergency preparedness. During the year, UNICEF consolidated the prepositioning of critical supplies for a rapid emergency response as one of the Country Office’s main preparatory action. In 2021, the CO made progress mobilizing resources to diversify the prepositioned supplies that could benefit 76,000 people (38,600 children) as part of an initial response in the sectors of WASH, Education, Child Protection and Nutrition: hygiene kit, water storage means, recreation and educational kit, micronutrient powder for food fortification. A total of 7,033 children and adolescents from 12 schools in Pinar del Río, Artemisa and the special municipality

of Isla de la Juventud benefited from the contribution of 12,000 m<sup>2</sup> of prepositioned waterproof blankets after being affected by Hurricane Ida.

The CO produced the plan for mainstreaming the gender approach in UNICEF Cuba's programme activity. As part of the '*Father from the Beginning*' campaign, 60 fathers were trained as instructors for the promotion of responsible fatherhood, and reached more than 3.5 million people through radio and television, and 1.6 million on social media, with messages from the communication initiatives 'Papá Olímpico' and 'de Pá a Pá'.

The '*Usefulness for Life*' strategy was validated by administrative personnel and teachers from vocational schools and used as an awareness-raising framework with activities and resources to teach 729 students from 7 vocational schools in Havana about changing gender-based myths. Further, reached 390 teachers and 1,729 students from 17 schools in Havana with messages on responsible sexuality and prevention of gender-based violence.

Through social media, 1,662 people received information and 100 specialists from all over the country were trained on the father's role in the protection of breastfeeding in a health emergency. Another 800 people strengthened their capacities on health issues with a gender and rights approach focused on adolescence.

A total of 2,774 health-care professionals (including 1,941 women) improved their knowledge, capacities and technical ability in attending to and managing maternal and child health, including the COVID-19 protocols in pediatric patients, and expectant and new mothers. Created a space on Telegram with more than 120 participants to strengthen the capacities of health-care personnel in gender-sensitive comprehensive adolescent health issues, child sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence in adolescence. Eighty health promoters from all over the country have information available on responsible and safe sexuality and detecting and responding to sexual and/or gender-based violence.

In 2021, UNICEF Cuba gained more than 15,000 new followers on its various digital platforms and significantly increased its outreach through social media. Its Facebook account reached 6 million people and engaged 1.1 million (63.5 per cent women and 36.5 per cent men). Young people (13–18 years) represented 2.05 per cent of the audience. Most of the people reached are parents, caregivers or teachers.

Out of the 71,666 users visiting the website, launched this year, 15,600 users returned to look for more information during the year. The site achieved 89,343 page views, with 40 human interest stories, press releases and reports published.

UNICEF Cuba implemented Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) to support programme components to promote messages aimed at protecting children's rights in the context of COVID-19. UNICEF Cuba worked with partners, celebrities, Goodwill Ambassador and influencers was key and was widely publicized through more than 60 national and 30 international media outlets.

Country Office provided full local support to UNICEF global communications priorities, campaigns and partnerships, disseminating these elements in a locally appropriate way (school reopening, campaign against vaccine hesitancy, World Children's Day, launch of the State of the World's Children). Communication for Development campaigns included Breastfeeding Week, International Day for People with Disabilities, 16 days of activism against gender violence, the 75th anniversary of UNICEF and the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Cuba.

UNICEF Cuba promoted opportunities to enhance the participation and empowerment of adolescents by disseminating human interest stories to raise awareness of fake news and misinformation, mental

health issues linked to COVID-19 confinement and the importance of vaccines, to provide support and convey positive messages to their peers. UNICEF Cuba and the British Council co-sponsored an international YouTuber project, 'Festival Rodando Fantasias', organized by a Cuban community project that works on the development of digital skills among children and adolescents and involves more than 200 children and adolescents from Cuba and Latin America and the Caribbean and which included two presentations by UNICEF on climate change and digital literacy. Ten adolescents participated in and contributed their knowledge, thoughts, and voice to the UNICEF anthology initiative 'Reimagining a Future in Health', thanks to the combined effort of Ministry of Health entities.

Programme delivery continued to be managed within a business continuity plan. A major impact was achieved in the efficient use of IT platforms and paperless work, contributing significantly to reducing the Country Office's environmental footprint. On the other hand, the well-being of the staff, and their protection against COVID-19, remained a priority within a complex national context marked by shortages and difficult living conditions. As a result of the measures taken (teleworking, personal protective equipment and an oxygen concentrator, access to PCR tests and medicines, and support provided to staff to acquire food and basic living items), no COVID-19 outbreaks occurred among Country Office personnel.

Country Office was highly effective in quickly adjusting to the monetary reform implemented in Cuba in early 2021. A major achievement in this area was the effective migration of over 80 per cent of financial transactions to direct transfers, reducing transactional costs and risks in payments and enhancing relationships with banking institutions for activities to be continued in 2022 that will bring about budget savings.

Procurement of programme supplies represented a challenge in 2021, in a context of local shortages and complex international dynamics for freight. Supplies represented 73 per cent of the programme budget, of which 63 per cent was allocated to supplies for the COVID-19 humanitarian response. In terms of impact, the Country Office managed to arrange 56 per cent of all supplies within the agreed delivery time (versus 7.8 per cent in 2020), accounting for 80 per cent of total programme procurement value, thus improving the logistical supply chain accelerating delivery to beneficiaries.

## UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF Cuba is the leader of the Human Development with Equity outcome and programme indicators to monitor the UN framework for the immediate response to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 within the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, and led the planning, indicator definition and reporting in the UNINFO platform.

Supporting the emergency response, UNICEF Cuba coordinated an interagency technical team integrated by PAHO, WFP, UNFPA, UNDP, UNIDO and RCO. To support national vaccination, this group quickly took a more holistic view of the UNS contribution to the emergency response. The space facilitated technical exchange, financial resource mobilization, complementing efforts and achieving synergies between cooperation actions. This technical team held 12 meetings and mapping of the contribution of the UNS. The main categories of the response to the health emergency have been personal protective equipment, medicines, medical supplies, hygiene equipment and supplies, diagnostic means, support materials, contraceptives and food, for a total of US\$ 8.3 million.

UNICEF Cuba took on the responsibility of chairing the Operations Management Team (OMT) in 2021, positioning itself as a leading agency in operations across the UNS. Under the leadership of UNICEF Cuba, the BOS process was conducted, coordinated and concluded for 2021–2026, with favourable comments from the Development Coordination Office (DCO), revision and UNCT approval.

UNICEF Cuba led processes with significant impact on UN operations and programme delivery such as a common approach to air cargo handling services; dialogue with commercial bank headquarters for service improvement; dialogue with the DCO and the OMT on mutual recognition; and purchase of medicines for staff and preparation of UN protocols and a checklist to enhance protection of staff against COVID-19.

The Interagency Gender Group (UNFPA, PAHO and UNICEF) updated the gender situation analysis. The material is part of the national study on the intersections between gender-based violence and violence against children in Cuba, the guide ‘Breaking the Silence II’ for group reflection and analysis of forms of gender violence, and the 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS). The documents constitute the basis for interventions with gender as the main focus.

UNICEF Cuba was actively involved in the UN Communication team, providing inputs for the inter-agency communication strategy, newsletters and the co-production of materials to promote preventive measures against COVID-19, and participating in joint campaigns. It also contributed to CO and inter-agency efforts to request emergency funds.

Specific Country Office resource mobilization efforts to engage emerging and non-traditional donors, such as the ECHO, the governments of Canada and the Republic of Korea; and, most recently, a project with the Government of Japan, with human interest stories, press releases and audiovisual materials showing children’s and adolescents’ empowerment and engagement.

UNICEF Cuba expanded partnerships with new national and local organizations, including collaboration with the Provincial Culture Office in Granma province, the A+ Adolescent Spaces Center of the Havana City Historian’s Office, the National Center for Sexual Education, the Center for Youth Studies, the Ministry of Justice, and the Center for Psychological Orientation and Attention of the University of Havana.

## Lessons Learned and Innovations

- The construction of output indicators for the United Nations Sustainable Development

Cooperation Framework outcome ‘Human Development with Equity’ showed that, although the designation of UNICEF as the leading agency in the results group is recognized, this leadership implies the inclusion of approaches by each individual agency, which requires additional time and analysis. Even though the RCO agreed on a methodological guide, the same guidelines are not being followed by all agencies in practice, as they have different approaches.

- Although the expected product was delivered, the process took longer than planned and required increased workload. It is recommended to speed up implementation of inter-agency work by making guides, templates, working tools and platforms available and using them appropriately, substituting separate approaches with inclusive ones, and ensuring the adoption of the guiding principles on business and human rights by each of the agencies.
- In a year marked by the diversification of partnerships for the promotion and creation of protective environments, the existence of information gaps on the conditions in which a protective space must function and the minimal standards it must observe stands out, an aspect about which work was carried out this year.
- The need to promote ways for children to participate and voice their opinions, needs, priorities and expectations related to these spaces was also made evident. The resources on protective environments created in 2021 need to be communicated and disseminated during the coming year, and training efforts need to be carried out based on these materials.
- The above is even more relevant with regard to the spaces dealing with adolescents who have committed acts that the law classifies as crimes, recognizing the country’s political tensions as a bottleneck for the achievement of results in this area.
- In a context characterized by a complex epidemiological situation due to COVID-19, the accumulated experience, the permanent exchange with the country’s authorities and the established partnerships constituted a strength and an opportunity for high-impact interventions, integrating other partners and reducing freight costs and implementation times. This allowed UNICEF to provide an opportune and effective response to the emergency, and to manage resources that responded to the national health-care system’s most critical needs.
- The relationship between the activities in response to the pandemic and the development programme allowed UNICEF Cuba to support the continuity of medical services, to complement efforts and to achieve more comprehensive responses to the problems affecting the health and well-being of children and adolescents.
- Digital platforms proved an efficient way to create technical capacities, reach families and adolescents and maintain dialogue and exchange with these audiences, adapted to the context.
- Due to Cuba’s achievements in implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the country’s specific context, Cuban media do not always focus on analyzing the gaps and challenges to be faced in terms of children’s rights. On the other hand, there is a need to strengthen the skills of journalists who either do not have proper knowledge of the issues to be covered, have a limited or preconceived approach to them or simply reproduce stereotypes. As a result, more virtual learning should be implemented to strengthen Cuban media capacities and to



identify journalists who could become children's rights advocates. Social media and world politics are transforming the way in which Cuba is interacting with other countries and how it is shaping its own society. Due to the country's quite recent access to the internet, there is no experience in managing communication risks, and the approach tends to be defensive rather than proactive. In light of UNICEF Cuba's collaboration agreement with the government, it is, therefore, key to strengthen the Country Office's social listening mechanisms to mitigate risks related to its work, to engage Cuban authorities in feedback mechanisms, and to support the implementation of the Accountability to Affected Populations framework and activities.