

Azerbaijan

Update on the context and situation of children

UNICEF started the new Country Programme of Cooperation 2021-2025. The post-conflict context and global COVID-19 pandemic shaped the Government's priority agenda and decisions within and beyond the social development sectors.

Soon after the conflict escalation ended late 2020, the Government initiated its two-year (2021-2022) reconstruction plan for the Karabakh region (USD 2.6 billion). The Government plans to start returning Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in early 2022.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued in 2021, with 616,947 cases and 8,358 deaths as of 31 December 2021. The Government took early action for COVID-19 vaccination and Azerbaijan was one of the first countries in the region to offer vaccines from January 2021. By the end of the year, over 11 million vaccine doses have been administered and 46.6 per cent of the population received at least two doses. UNICEF's support to the Government's strategy and implementation of the COVID-19 vaccination, including vaccine procurement through COVAX-Facility, contributed to the country's good performance. As the Chair of the Non-Aligned Movement, Azerbaijan also advocated for global efforts to provide safe, effective, and accessible vaccination for every person in every part of the world. It supported the UN General Assembly's resolution Vaccine Equity.

According to the Asian Development bank, Azerbaijan's economy (GDP) grew with 2.2 per cent in 2021 compared to the recession of -4.3 per cent in 2020. However, the inflation rate was higher (4.5 percent), which created difficulties particularly for low-income families. Overall, there is a growing trend in social spending of the government budget. The current level of government spending on education, health and social protection social expenditure is about 39 per cent. This is a notable increase and important in improving human capital in the country. Further efforts are needed to align budget spending with development needs. In addition, in 2021 government initiated mid-term expenditure and developed micro-fiscal (2022-2025) framework within results based budgeting reform.

The United Nations (UN) Country Team and the Government of Azerbaijan signed the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2021 to 2025.

The government adopted its new strategy Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities on Social Economic Development, which will shape the country's development agenda for the coming years. The strategy sets out five priorities: 1) Sustainable competitive economy; 2) A dynamic, inclusive society based on social justice; 3) Competitive human capital and a space for modern innovations; 4) Great return to the liberated territories; and 5) Clean environment and "green growth" country. The mid-term action plan for 2022-2026 will be rolled out in 2022.

Youth development continued to be a high priority, guided by the government's youth strategy for 2015-2025 which includes e.g. enhancing employment opportunities, supporting talented young people, promoting healthy life style, providing equal opportunities for young people with disabilities etc.

In 2021, the scale-up of the mandatory health insurance was finally implemented, leading to structural changes in the organization and provision of health services across the country. Further implementation of the restructuring is scheduled for 2022. There are concerns about implications on availability and accessibility of primary health care services in some locations. Furthermore, there is an

urgent need for 2022 to improve planning, communication and coordination to improve the reform process. This is important to avoid negative impacts on the provision of essential child health services. Of particular concern is the drop in immunization coverage, which has fallen in one-third of the districts below 80 per cent for polio, DTP-3 and MMR-2 vaccines.

The sex ratio at birth was 114 boys per 100 girls (2020 data) indicating son-preference.

Despite the ongoing pandemic, all educational institutions opened for onsite learning in September 2021. The country maintained onsite teaching and learning while temporarily switching to blended schooling for schools with positive cases. To address the learning gaps of children affected by the pandemic, the national education system organized summer catch-up learning classes nationwide.

The governance of public preschools in Azerbaijan will be transferred from the local Executive Powers to the Ministry of Education as of 1 January 2022. Azerbaijan piloted the Mid-Term Expenditure Framework for the Education sector in 2021 with the mid-year education public spending report published by the Ministry of Finance. A single credit-based system from sub-bachelor to bachelor degree programs has been introduced to the Law on Education to ensure the progression route from vocational to higher education.

2021 was the start of implementation of the National Action Plan (2020-2025) for implementation of the “Children’s Strategy for 2020-2030”. A number of legislative acts related to child rights and child protection were drafted and now under review of the relevant line ministries. Government plans to implement some important improvements and reforms in the directions like health, education, and child protection.

Fueled by the pandemic, compared to the previous years, the Azerbaijan Child Helpline received almost doubled the number of calls in 2020-2021. 350 girls and 336 boys in 2019; 649 girls and 475 boys in 2020; 765 girls and 560 boys in 2021.

Although the Government and CSO partners make all efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children, lack of effective referral mechanisms and a limited number of professional social-workers and psychologists are key barriers that need long-term investments in the child protection system.

According to official data, around 600,000 children live in households that received any social transfers under social protection, counting 22 per cent of the child population of Azerbaijan. According to the decrees signed in 2021, the Government will increase social benefits from 2022. On average, the payments to children will be increased by 25 per cent from 2022. In addition, with an increased need criterion for Targeted Social Assistance, the number of families receiving it, is expected to go up in 2022.

The government is increasingly active in climate action including renewable energy, tree planting and water resources. UNICEF and government have started high level discussions to collaborate on climate action.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Goal area 1: Every child survives and thrives

UNICEF’s Health and Nutrition programme continued to focus on COVID-19, especially vaccination. This included providing assistance related to logistics, communication, and coordination for the government’s procurement of COVID-19 vaccines via COVAX. In 2021, Azerbaijan has received

254,200 AstraZeneca vaccines and 1,763,190 Pfizer vaccines from COVAX. Vaccination-related messages were promoted online reaching about 1.4 million people with messaging on short-term side effects, preventive behavior after vaccination, vaccination for pregnant women, and myth debunking.

The successful completion of the PROACT-Training Programme with the support of USAID and close technical cooperation with WHO built the capacity of 3,031 frontline health workers on Infection Prevention and Control (IPC), COVID-19 case management, and hospital emergency management through 12 newly established district PROACT Training Centres. The 12 Training Centres continue to function after the completion of the UNICEF's Programme, with additional 3,216 health care workers trained at these facilities by the end of the year.

UNICEF supported the implementation of home visits by 128 local maternal and child health doctors and nurses in the four pilot districts, reaching 10,766 families with 17,752 children of 0-3 years old and 1,969 pregnant women. Home visitors were assessing the child's environment at home, including all household members; and paying special attention in engagement of fathers in ECD counselling and childcare. UNICEF also introduced the Home Visiting model to one additional pilot district and developed a new partnership with the Medical Colleges to incorporate the Home Visiting package (which includes a specific module on engagement of fathers in childcare and ECD) into the college curriculum.

UNICEF supported the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) through organizing ToTs for 10 national master trainers and consequent training of personnel of two maternity wards, which managed to implement the 10 Steps towards successful breastfeeding. Clinical guidelines on maternal nutrition and Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) counselling were developed and submitted to MoH for approval. During the National Breastfeeding Week, UNICEF supported MoH to develop a series of 'expert talks' focusing on the importance of breastfeeding, breastfeeding during the pandemic, and the positive effect of breastfeeding on children's mental health and brain development, reaching 184,857 women.

With the financial support of the EU, UNICEF strengthened the partnership with the Heydar Aliyev Foundation (HAF) and the Regional Development Public Union (RDPU), the NGO under HAF, in organizing a high-level conference to launch the national Early Childhood Development (ECD) campaign and the digital (ECD) Resource Hub.

UNICEF further enhanced the ECD digital Resource Hub, including an ECD web portal, a Facebook page, an Instagram page, and a YouTube channel in the local language. The ECD Resource Hub has become an important source of information for professional childcare workers and parents/caregivers of young children, reaching 1,627,324 audiences in 2021. The topics cover all aspects of ECD, including the role of fathers and their engagement in childcare.

Through community engagement and the establishment of Positive Parenting Platforms, UNICEF supported community-based parenting education on ECD. Awareness, knowledge and skills of 8,643 parents and caregivers (of young children in the four pilot districts) were increased, covering the topics of the importance of 1,000 days, breastfeeding, nurturing care, child immunization, child psychology, and child safety. Both fathers, mothers and grandparents reported changing their behaviours through practising proper breastfeeding, child discipline, child safety, and early stimulation. It also had a positive impact on shifting social norms and behaviors towards positive parenting practices in the community.

Goal area 2: Every child learns

The conflict escalation in 2020 and school closures caused significant losses of learning and psychological stresses for both children and teachers. The UNICEF Education in Emergencies assessment informed the initial response and contributed to long-term planning processes in relation to

post-conflict and COVID-19 education recovery. UNICEF advocated for reopening the schools in September that contributed to the decision by the Ministry of Education (MoE) to reopen the schools for all children. UNICEF supported the MoE in a Learning Recovery Support initiative in six districts that provided 700 primary and secondary school students (378 boys and 322 girls) with learning catch-up support and 75 teachers in individual professional mentoring support. UNICEF, in cooperation with the MoE, implemented an initiative on School-based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in nine conflict-affected regions across Azerbaijan to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children and adolescents affected by conflict. 3,442 female and 68 male schoolteachers enhanced their capacities to develop social and emotional learning skills of children and adolescents, 323 female and 6 male school psychologists developed the new set of skills in Psychological First Aid. 1,002 mothers and 23 fathers living in conflict-affected areas acquired better understanding and supported their children's mental health needs.

UNICEF's support to early learning and preschool education received full buy-in from the Government in 2021: it covered all costs of the School Readiness Programme and ensured over 90 per cent enrollment of one-year preschool education. The School-Based Early Learning Centres for 3-4 years old children received direct investment of the HAF and the EU, expanding from 50 centres to 850 centres, covering 15,000 children, mostly in rural and remote areas with no access to preschool education. Following UNICEF's continuous technical support and advocacy, a Presidential Decree was issued in December 2021 to transfer all public kindergartens from local Executive Authorities to the MoE. In 2021, UNICEF piloted a new Inclusive Community-based Early Learning Centres model operated by NGO partners in eight communities of four districts under the EU-funded programme, reaching 160 girls and 194 boys of 3-4 years old, including six children with disabilities, in urban and rural settings where no prior access to preschool education existed.

Building on the UNICEF's advocacy and technical support for inclusive education, the MoE decided in 2021 to expand the inclusive schools with eight schools in seven regions. 16 children with disabilities enrolled in the Grade one in the new school year. UNICEF supported the revision of national assessment policies and professional standards for teachers in general education, and the development of a set of recommendations for the MoE to enhance the quality of teaching and learning for all children, with particular emphasis on inclusive teaching competencies and skills.

UNICEF supported the MoE with introduction of Basic Life Skills Education programme (BLSE) in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) schools, reaching around 15,000 students annually. The BLSE programme has also been piloted in general schools in three districts affected by the conflict escalation last year, helping adolescents (1,219 boys and 1081 girls) better cope with stress and psychological pressures.

With the EU's financial support, 52 male and 24 female young people with disabilities benefited from professional development opportunities in various occupations and participated in the first Azerbaijani Abilympic Competition supported by UNICEF.

Goal area 3: Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

Shortly after the conflict escalation, UNICEF mobilized 35 qualified psychologists and social workers to provide Psychological First Aid and mental health psychosocial support services based on UNICEF's guidelines with gender sensitive methodology and principles. In the four target districts, 1479 boys, 1265 girls and 405 mothers were reached. Social workers and psychologists provided relevant support to 30 children and four women- victims of violence. Prevention of GBV and VAC was one of the key topics. 5899 girls and 7432 boys in six districts affected by the conflict escalation participated in the recreational activities designed by UNICEF and delivered by the ASAN Volunteer Organization.

The Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) Programme has enhanced capacities of over 492

schoolteachers (409 female; 83 male) in 10 districts affected by the conflict to increase awareness and knowledge of children and adolescents, including from Internally Displaced Person (IDP) families. With funding from the UK Government and EU EORE programme, Community Committees were established in 80 communities of 10 districts, a large number of EORE educational materials were developed and produced. 91,602 (50,759 male and 40,843 female) people, including 75,098 (41,178 boys and 33,920 girls) adolescents increased their knowledge.

UNICEF provided direct social work case management services for 335 children (166 boys, 169 girls) who returned from conflict zones (Iraq and Syria). The social work case management services included assessing the situation of children and extended families, referrals of issues to relevant services, working with family members, schools and local authorities to prevent violence, possible stigma, and discrimination against children.

In 2021, the EU-funded pilot of the Integrated Social Services model was successfully adopted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population (MoLSPP). The e-Case Management software developed with UNICEF's support was integrated into the Management Information System of the Ministry and utilized in three local branches of the Social Services Agency of the MoLSPP. These major developments will ensure the sustainability of the results achieved by the UNICEF-supported pilot initiative.

UNICEF introduced international standards and best practices on foster care models in the framework of childcare reforms led by the MoLSPP. With UNICEF's advocacy and technical support, MoLSPP is expanding the policy discussion from child adoption to a broader concept of alternative care to reduce the number of children in institutional care. During 2021, the reintegration process of children from institutions was actively promoted. According to government, about 83 children were reintegrated to their biological families from institutions during 2021.

UNICEF supported promoting the Azerbaijan Child Helpline (ACH) services in 2021 and strengthened the awareness of children and families on violence against children (VAC). This effort also supported building the culture of reporting on VAC cases and demanding social service support. As a result, the number of VAC cases reported through ACH increased from 61 in 2020 to 414 in 2021. Jointly with other UN Agencies, UNICEF contributed to the 16-Day GBV Activism campaign. The campaign focused on male engagement in tackling the root causes of violence against women. The communications component included a series of communication messages and illustrations widely shared through social media accounts, TV and radio highlights with participation of UN team members and experts, and outdoor publicity related actions.

UNICEF advocated and provided technical support for legislation development aiming at bringing in international standards and norms of child rights and structural changes in child rights and child protection legislation and practice. UNICEF supported for drafting as well as advocating for the endorsement of the Child Code, the Guidelines on the identification of vulnerable children and providing social protection services, the Law on Regulations of the Commissions on Minors Affairs, the Guidelines on child-friendly communication and procedures, and the Guidance on monitoring of child rights fulfillment. They are expected to be approved in 2022.

With the support of UNICEF, the Ombudsman office prepared an independent report on the juvenile justice system in Azerbaijan for the first time.

Goal area 4: Every child lives in a safe and clean environment

Currently, the Country Programme does not include specific outcomes and/or outputs related to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), environment and climate. However, due to the pandemic, UNICEF Azerbaijan has continued public awareness raising on the importance of handwashing in prevention of COVID-19 through social media and incorporated it in the community-based activities such as ECD

and parenting education. As part of to support the health system in responding to COVID-19, UNICEF supported the participation of four health professionals from Azerbaijan in a 10-week distance-learning course on WASH in healthcare facilities. The participation of the Azerbaijani professionals opened an initial conversation with the health authorities on WASH in health facilities.

Over the last few years, climate change impacts such as water shortages are becoming a critical issue in Azerbaijan. UNICEF initiated a new partnership with the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources to address these concerns. Other Ministries have also expressed interest to collaborate with UNICEF on climate change, for example in relation to shock responsive social protection, youth participation, and education.

Goal area 5: Every child has an equitable chance in life

The COVID-19 pandemic and conflict escalation alerted the Government on the importance of building social resilience in society. The Country Office expanded the partnerships with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population (MoLSPP) for future cooperation in the Shock Responsive Social Protection system. For the first time in the country, the Multidimensional Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA) is being piloted, and the results will be available by mid-2022.

UNICEF continued to support the State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs (SCFWCA) with coordinating the implementation of the National Plan of Action for Children (NPA 2021-2025). This included improving their capacities on monitoring and evaluation to monitor and report the results of the action plan.

Conducting a Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) has been prioritized in the State Programme on Statistics approved by the Government. UNICEF Country Office worked in 2021 to prepare the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) that will fill in the identified SDG data gap after it completes. All MICS documents were translated and passed to the State Statistics Committee (SSC) during the year. UNICEF also organized a three-day MICS Survey Plan Design workshop with the participation of the five core staff of the SSC who will be responsible for designing and coordinating the MICS process.

The rapid data generation (phone surveys) and alternative data sources (social listening) - the Country Office developed in 2020 to support the COVID-19 response planning - were selected as one of the best practices by the Regional Office and Headquarters.

Gender

The #GirlsCan Campaign, implemented jointly with the Association of Football Federations of Azerbaijan (AFFA) has facilitated discussion on father-daughter relationships, roles and responsibilities of fathers on the girls' career choices and their motivation and reached 15,736 people.

Furthermore, gender has been incorporated across the programme implementation throughout the year.

Adolescents and youth

28 young people (8 boys and 20 girls) from the Baku based Youth Career Development Centre (YCDC) gained new competencies on ART tools and project management and capable of applying gained knowledge toward community development and reflect its social impact. Capacities of the YDDCs in provision of mentoring support to young people was strengthened. Thanks to new competences gained young people engaged 450 more young people (130 male, 320 female) into their Art Therapy and Art for Development initiatives.

Based on the survey among adolescents and young people in the eight districts (Baku-Khazar, Bilasuvar, Shamkir, Gazakh, Tovuz, Tartar, Barda and Goranboy), five small scale projects in

consultation with the local executive committees were designed and implemented by Youth Advisory Councils of the districts. The small-scale projects increased knowledge of young people on COVID-19 prevention, gender equality, prominent environmental challenges, healthy lifestyle, initiated psychosocial support to children through sport supplies and guidance on home-based sport activities. 3,810 adolescents and young people benefitted from the project activities in the eight districts.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF actively participated in and contributed to the UNSDCF planning and coordination. UNICEF supported the development, monitoring and reporting of the UN-Azerbaijan Joint Work Plan (JWP) 2021. UNICEF contributed to the UNCT-SWAP Gender Scorecard Assessment, for example by assessing if gender analysis was integrated to the Common Country Assessment, if gender was mainstreamed in the UNSDCF outcomes and Joint Work Plans. UNICEF also co-led the Human Capital Development sub-group of the new Azerbaijan Development Partners Cooperation Mechanism, enhancing the partnerships with all development partners in the country.

UNICEF further expanded the partnership with the Government, including open and strategic dialogues with the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Cabinet of the Ministers. The equal level partnerships established by UNICEF with the key health sector authorities – the Ministry of Health, the State Agency on Mandatory Health Insurance (SAMHI), the Management Union of Medical Territorial Units (TABIB), gained vital trust of the health sector's partners on UNICEF's support. The expanding partnership with the Vocational Education Department of the Ministry of Education allowed the introduction of the Basic Life-Skill Training Modules in the formal education system. The strong partnership with the newly established Social Service Agency of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population contributed to the successful support of institutional capacity building and development of the social workforce in the system. The partnership with the Azerbaijan Youth Foundation was expanded with a new initiative of the Intern Academy. Broader partnerships were established for child development, including in emerging areas such as climate change. For the first time, the Country Office initiated a relationship with the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources.

Good progress was also made in developing partnerships with the Parliament and its commissions. UNICEF engaged the participation of the Parliament Committees of Health, Social Development and Family, Women and Children Affairs in the high-level event on ECD and gained their support on ECD. Azerbaijan Milli Majlis actively participated in UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional high-level online Consultation in December 2021.

UNICEF renewed the MoU with the Heydar Aliyev Foundation (HAF) in the new Country Programme cycle, allowing UNICEF to continue engaging HAF's investment in supporting child development. The partnerships with the Azerbaijan Youth Foundation, the Regional Development Public Union (RDPU), the ASAN Volunteer Organization, the Azerbaijan Red Crescent Society (AzRC), and other NGOs/CSOs enabled the Country Office to pilot innovative models and reach the most vulnerable children and their families in communities.

The Country Programme strengthened its relationship with international development partners through regularly share information and develop joint intervention initiatives. In partnership with USAID, the PROACT Training Programme built the capacity of frontline health workers on COVID-19 Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) and case management capacities. With the financial support of the received financial contributions from the Government of the United Kingdom and the European Commission Humanitarian Aid (ECHO), UNICEF implemented the post-conflict intervention programme on Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE).

Lessons Learned and Innovations

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in increased attention and investment in health from both the government and international development partners. The ongoing health system reform provides an excellent opportunity to integrate all high-impact health interventions and services to improve child health and development in Azerbaijan, while challenges in coordination among all institutions in the health sector administration. UNICEF used this opportunity to introduce a set of essential services, including the Iron and Folic Acid (IFA) supplementation for pregnant women and the new universal-progressive model of home visiting in the PHC services, and support to strengthen the role of nurses in delivering maternal and child health services at Primary Health Care (PHC) level. The lack of capacity of health behaviour change is a significant constraint in the country.

UNICEF and MoE are vital partners in the education sector. UNICEF's long term technical support and policy advocacy successfully brought preschool education and inclusive education into the national education reform agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic was the first time most teachers facilitated distance or digital learning, and in Azerbaijan, many teachers lacked the necessary pedagogical and technical skills to teach effectively. UNICEF's future programming should maintain a focus on digital competencies, online pedagogies, and the development of learners' social and emotional skills. Building solid linkages between the development and emergency programmes remain the core principle in programme implementation in 2021. The Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support was introduced starting from the conflict-affected districts and further expanded to other schools.

During the pandemic virtual engagement and digital advocacy took on special significance. Pushing out messaging on social media or even some public-facing content through emails (e.g. Newsletter for partners) became not just a tool but a key strategy for communication. UNICEF has used widespread smartphones and internet access to design its ECD package and parenting education. The online web portal, social network pages, WhatsApp application and other online platforms were used for ECD communication campaigns and promoting ECD, positive parenting, and access to social services.

UNICEF successfully reached the most vulnerable children and families affected by the conflict emergency through quality MHPSS, social work services and recreational activities. These services were provided for the first time in the country and received high appreciation by children, families, and local and national government authorities. UNICEF played an active role in promoting cross-sectoral coordination and partnership in delivering emergency services.

UNICEF worked well in introducing new intervention models into the health and education systems through incorporating the models into pre-service and in-service training systems, which created a better condition for sustainability.

Focusing on gender equality and promoting girls' access to services were critical considerations in programme management and advocacy with government and NGO/CSO partners. Capacity building of NGO partners in social services also included the concept of maintaining gender equality in service delivery as well as reporting on services with disaggregated data with age, sex, disability status of children. UNICEF also contributed to the advocacy and capacity building of government partners on gender-responsive and gender transformative programming through the UNSDCF platform.

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the social development and global agenda in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although the Government is continuously making efforts to support the population, reversed progress is expected, particularly in child immunization and school learning outcomes. In 2022, UNICEF will continue to support the government in addressing the impact of COVID-19 pandemic by supporting the improvement of the

primary health care services and education recovery programme. UNICEF will prioritize vulnerable children and their families, particularly children living in the conflict-affected districts and children from IDP families, to prepare their return to the regained territories.