The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications of the political developments of 2020 continued. In addition to CSOs, academic think tanks, media outlets and even businesses were closed in 2021. With these developments, statements from the UN Secretary General and other UN officials urged for respect of human rights obligations including freedoms of expression, assembly and association. These developments have influenced the country’s overall socio-economic situation and children’s well-being in particular.

In 2021 Belarus’ economy started to improve from the economic contraction of 2020, with a 2.3% increase in GPD in January-November 2021 as compared to the same period in 2020. During this period real income of the general population increased by 4.6%, which contributed to the reduction of children living below the national monetary poverty line to 9.0% in Q3 2021, though still double the general population poverty rate of 4.0% (Q3 2021).

Economic improvements for families remain fragile, as a series of economic sanction packages imposed by the EU, US and other countries could threaten economic stability. In these potential circumstances, the most vulnerable populations such as large families, single parent households and people without higher education could face the greatest risks to fall into poverty.

By January 2022, there were 709,622 officially reported infections of COVID-19 (10 January 2022). Primary health facilities and children’s regular vaccine schedules remained functional. In December 2021, the Ministry of Health made VeroCell COVID-19 vaccine available for adolescents (12-17 years) with parental consent. As of January 10th, 5,300 adolescents and 42.2% of the adult population were fully vaccinated. Over this period, mental health of the population has become more affected.

Despite efforts to reduce the number of children in residential care institutions, 5,881 children lived in residential care institutions in 2020. While there is a national intersectoral working group on de-institutionalization, a comprehensive interagency strategy is needed to prevent the flow of children going to institutions and to increase return to families for those in institutions. COVID’s epidemiological restrictions limited access and contacts of biological parents and potential foster parents with children.

Belarus has strong policies for young children, yet children with disabilities remain a vulnerable group with a 2019 household survey revealing that at least 2% of the 2-4 years old child population experienced a minimum of one functional difficulty. Amendments to the Law on Healthcare at end-2020 established a definition for habilitation and early intervention (EI), an inter-disciplinary service for young children (0-3 years) with disabilities and their families, and stipulated that EI measures are one of the constituent parts of medical prevention. In April 2021, a Ministry of Health resolution strengthened these provisions with a standard for organization of early intervention.

While schools in Belarus have remained open throughout the pandemic, this period revealed a high risk of increased inequalities due to the digital divide with 8.4% of households with children not having computers. Furthermore, access to inclusive education is more limited for children with disabilities, with only 62% of them (3-17 years) in “mainstream” schools, who for the majority only have minor development difficulties. Every fourth child (23.6%) 2-17 years old with functional difficulties and every fifth (19.6%) with a registered disability did not attend any educational institution. Recent legislative developments with the Social Protection for Persons with Disabilities Act and Code of Education strengthen inclusive frameworks, by establishing legal definitions that
provide impetus to shift from the current medical approach to disability to a functional approach.

Shifts in gender attitudes and norms seemed to evolve over COVID-19, with reports that one-third of Belarusian fathers increased their time with their children, as well as their share of household work. This change is critical to foster further, as MICS6 data revealed that only 31.1% of children aged 24-59 months are involved in at least 4 stimulating and developing activities with fathers.

Experiences from the pandemic opened new perspectives in services for children through the advancement of technology. In 2021, e-counseling for ECI services were initiated, allowing children to receive care in their daily routines and environments. At the same time, socio-political tensions resulted in a narrowing of space for civil society organizations (CSO), with over 300 de-registered as of end 2021. Closing of CSOs substantially limited partnership opportunities for the UN, disrupting provision of specialized expertise and services for vulnerable groups.

Starting from June, there was a sharp increase in attempts by irregular migrants to cross the Belarusian borders with Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. This situation culminated in mid-November when up to 2,000 migrants, including approximately 500 women and 300 children, were stranded at the Belarus-Poland border for several weeks in extremely harsh conditions. The majority were later transferred to a logistical centre, providing basic shelter and food, but not serving as a long-term solution.

In terms of legislative developments, the 2021-2025 State Programme “Education and Youth Policy" was approved by the Council of Minister in January 2021, including 11 sub-programmes focused on ensuring the accessibility of education for all categories and groups of children and young people, and developing the potential of adolescents and young people with their active involvement in public life. Likewise, two National Plans of Action were developed in consultation with adolescents and young people: (i) on the Improvement of the Situation of Children and Protection of their Rights for 2022-2026 and (ii) on Transitioning to Green Economy for 2021-2025.

**Major contributions and drivers of results**

The COVID-19 pandemic and volatile social-political environment created challenges that affected children and families in Belarus, as well as UNICEF programming. The country office (CO) needed to stay agile in programming approaches, adjust advocacy and external communications and keep political neutrality while upholding human rights principles.

**Goal 1: Every Child Survives and Thrives**

*Strengthening Healthcare Responses:*

Building on 2020 learning, the CO with the Belarusian Medical Academy of Postgraduate Education developed educational e-modules on COVID-19 prevention, diagnostics, and treatment, enhancing more than 12,700 medical professionals’ knowledge to provide quality care to approximately 100,000 patients including approximately 10,000 children. At the same time, over 6,590 psychologists and social pedagogues gained knowledge on psychological assistance, strengthening their capacities to serve frontline health workers and families with children through online and offline counselling and relaxation sessions.

With two youth-friendly health clinics (YFHCs), a new outreach approach was piloted to enhance at-risk adolescents’ access. These YFHCs established field work with at-risk adolescents, motivational counselling and ‘community spaces’ where adolescents can learn about the centre and decide when, or if, they are prepared to participate in services. This new outreach approach doubled YFHCs’ coverage of young people (10-24 years).
Enhancing Mental Health Outreach:

COVID-19 experiences revealed adolescents’ needs for better tailored online counselling services. With the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO), the CO developed an e-mental health platform for adolescents, enabling access to mental health and psycho-social information and/or remote psychological counselling and peer support. The platform also provides information for parents of adolescents. To respond to girls’ and young women’s particular mental health needs, the online course, *I am near*, was designed to provide a safe space for online peer support groups with supervision by course trainers.

The CO also developed resources to strengthen specialists’ capacities to support adolescents’ psychological well-being and coping mechanisms. A school programme, “My psychological well-being and peer support in crisis,” with accompanying methodological materials for school psychologists and students was created and certified by the National Institute of Education as an elective course for 8th to 11th grade students. With CO support over 200 psychologists and social pedagogues were trained on crisis psychological assistance by the Republican Center of Psychological Aid provided counselling to more than 3000 adolescents to support them to reduce stress and self-harm.

Strengthening ECD Systems:

To increase children’s access to early childhood intervention (ECI) services during COVID, the CO with three ECI centres piloted an e-counseling modality, making it possible to continue using ECI services remotely and establishing ‘routine-approach’ counselling not possible earlier. Certification of the 37 multidistrict ECI Centres across Belarus was also finalized. Piloting of inclusive early childhood education services within 14 pre-schools further enhanced access for children with developmental delays to attend pre-schools in their communities while receiving additional specialized support. From the pilot results, the Ministry of Education (MOE) committed to scale up the practice into 100 kindergartens. As a result of a three-year cross-sectoral effort, the ECI system is fully embedded into public services with 86% coverage of young children (0-3 years).

Supporting the health sector’s capacity in nutrition, the CO with the Republican Centre of Palliative Care and SPOON Foundation trained 75 ECI centre and baby home specialists on responsive and inclusive nutrition and feeding practices. Individual nutrition plans for children in the baby homes were developed with training for caregivers on the use and monitoring of the children’s nutrition status.

Nurturing Parenting Practices:

The CO’s strategy to empower parents focused on information outreach and behavioural change communication. The CO joined the ECARO initiative to develop the parenting mobile application, Bebbo, providing positive parenting information with practical tips on early childhood development. The CO also updated its “Better Parenting Package” which will be incorporated into Bebbo, adding new issues such as “Green Parenting,” which supports parents to build their children’s understanding and habits to be environmentally friendly.

To strengthen fathers’ involvement in children’s attachment and caretaking, the CO initiated with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MLSP) three, 30 to 50 second TV public service announcements (PSAs) on gender-specific parenting issues. This work is a first step in the CO’s efforts to enhance fathers’ engagement with their children; a priority identified by fathers.

Goal 2: Every Child Learns

Enhancing Inclusive Education (IE):

While Belarus committed to inclusive practices under the 2035 National Strategy for Sustainable
Development, implementation of SDG standards for education, where all children learn in their community schools, is still in progress.

With the Inclusive Education Institution, the CO launched a “virtual laboratory” platform to enhance teachers’ professional and pedagogical competencies on education of children with special education needs. This platform includes an electronic database of children and family cases, video-counselling tools, real-life class structures, and a repository of case studies.

Complementing this resource, the CO launched a national campaign, ‘Just Children at School,’ to change attitudes and behaviours towards children with disabilities in the educational setting, raising parents’ and education specialists’ awareness about the benefits of inclusive education. Through outreach with the media and dedicated events, as well as on the Internet, the campaign resulted in a 6% decrease in negative associations such as pity, and a 5% increase in respondents who believed that children with disabilities should study with other children.

**Advancing Adolescents’ 21st Century Skills:**

In the 2021-2025 programme, the CO has committed to support the enhancement of children’s 21st century skills within secondary and additional education programmes to address the fast digitalisation and transformation of the labour market.

In 2021, the CO with the MOE and national partners assessed how secondary and vocational education systems incorporate 21st century skills in their curricula. Findings revealed inconsistent application of competencies across educational levels and programme curricula that limit students from having solid 21st century skills. The assessment also identified a gap in skills where students from socio-economically advantaged families performed better than their peers. The CO used the assessment findings as the evidence-base for dialogue among Belarusian partners on steps to enhance 21st century skills in the education system, resulting in design of a national project.

At the same time, the CO integrated with national partners the social innovation programme, UPSHIFT, into Belarus’ additional education system as a tool to advance practical application of 21st century skills. UPSHIFT was approved as a ‘club activity’ under the additional education programme, with the methodology disseminated to all additional education institutions.

**Goal 3: Every Child is Protected from Violence and Exploitation**

**System Strengthening for Family-based Care:**

While the number of children in residential care is decreasing, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to negatively affect families with children, requiring strengthening of community-based services.

In partnership with the NGO, “Supporting Children Together,” and the Homiel Oblast Executive Committee, the CO enhanced case management and family support services for children with disabilities. Through this work, a needs assessment form for case management was piloted by the Homiel oblast baby home in close collaboration with social pedagogical centres. Results of the Homiel case management project showed a 35% reduction of children in the baby home, where 67% of children left without parental care in Homiel oblast were placed in family-based care without being placed in the baby home. These results encouraged the MOE and the Ministry of Health (MOH) to disseminate the Homiel experience to Vitebsk oblast. This initiative was funded by the private sector, where the corporate partner also agreed to extend support for another three years to scale up implementation.

**Enhancing Restorative Practices:**

With on-going advocacy to key stakeholders, mediation was incorporated into the criminal procedure and administrative processes, which is a crucial part of the J4CA Concept developed by the
Government with support from UNICEF. Application of mediation can serve as a form of diversion services. These legislative provisions are first steps in advancing restorative practices.

In addition, the CO enhanced children’s access to free legal aid through the mobile application, Advokot, designed and tested by adolescents and created in partnership with the Republican Association of Barristers. With the application, adolescents can obtain free legal consultations online, learn about the nearest legal centres, or gain legal information about potential criminal and administrative liabilities for minors.

Building system responses for prevention of violence:

Qualitative research by the Republican Centre on Psychological Aid on children’s psycho-social support needs identified peer bullying (57%) and school performance (52%) as some of the most stressful issues. In 2021, the CO focused on building communities’ support for children to live in violence-free, safe environments, with resilience to cope with stresses.

Recognizing bullying as a critical problem children face, the MOE with UNICEF started the Safe and Enabling Environment in Schools (SEES) programme in the 2020-2021 academic year. More than 11,500 5th to 9th grade students from 26 Belarusian schools have gained skills on how to set classroom rules of respect and restore classroom values when violations happen. Schools have implemented different approaches, such as peer support sessions, “positive portals,” or talk show series. Twenty-six mentors gained skills on restoring values and building trust in the classrooms to support the five-year piloting under the MOE. Online anti-bullying courses for school children and parents were created, comprising modules with interactive videos, checklists, practical tips and resources on bullying for victims, aggressors and witnesses.

The CO also leveraged business expertise to enhance children’s cyber safety. With the telecommunications company, MTS, the “#InternetWithoutBullying” campaign was launched, comprising videos and quizzes to test kids’ knowledge about staying safe online, which was used by 212,000 individuals. The partnership with MTS also used Tik-Tok to reach a wider audience, with 7.5 million views. Likewise, the CO held the conference, “Online Gaming: Risks and Opportunities for Children,” in cooperation with Belarus Cybersport Federation where UNICEF’s global recommendations for online-games producers were presented.

Supporting Migrant Women & Children

Since mid-November 2021, the CO has been partnering with the Grodno administration, Belarusian Red Cross (BRC), and other UN agencies to provide critical responses for migrant women and children at the Belarus-Poland border. In 2021, the CO with the BRC distributed life-saving supplies (e.g. hygiene kits, warm clothes) to approximately 2000 migrants in the Bruzgi logistics centre. The CO also strengthened BRC’s women’s shelter to support migrant women who gave birth, ensuring that their infants had critical supplies.

A child protection specialist from UNICEF’s Iraq CO was deployed, speaking the native language of the migrant women and children. Together with local partners and surge support, the CO established regular psycho-social sessions for approximately 200 migrant children. In addition, 10 participating psychologists from the Grodno Education Department and 12 migrant teacher volunteers were trained on critical issues such as child safeguarding, gender-based violence and case identification and referral processes.

Goal 4: Every Child lives in a Safe and Clean Environment

Enhancing Critical Resources for COVID-19:

The CO continued to partner with UN agencies and government colleagues to provide critical COVID-19 resources. Procurement of hand sanitizers, hygiene and handwashing items, elbow dispensers, and
distance thermometers to 343 education and childcare institutions kept 6917 children safer from COVID-19. With UNICEF’s Supply Division (SD), the CO procured 2000 oxygen concentrators ($1,708,508.48 value) as part of the MOH’s World Bank loan. In addition, the UNICEF SD donated to Belarus dexamethasone with a value of $353,430 and PPE worth $186,518.07.

Increasing Risk Communication and Community Engagement:

Building on strong 2020 risk communications work, the CO continued the information campaign, Clean Trend, disseminating PSAs on COVID-19 prevention measures, such as physical distancing, handwashing, or wearing masks. In the campaign’s second stage, an online resource for adolescents was developed, spreading COVID-19 messages through digital games, health advice, human interest stories, stickers, and electronic postcards. Prior to the MOH’s vaccination roll-out for children, the CO supported the MOE in the roll-out of a ‘largest lesson’ on COVID-19 and vaccination opportunities, reaching approximately 180,000 children.

Adolescent Voices for Climate Change

Partnering with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and the UN Development Programme, the CO supported a national consultation for 99 adolescents across Belarus to examine priority areas in the draft National Action Plan (NAP) on Transitioning to Green Economy. Adolescents presented recommendations to the relevant ministries, initiating an on-going dialogue between young people and government colleagues.

Under the Ecology VTalks, 40 volunteers participated in a 3km “plogging” race, collecting 116 kilos and 1840 litres of garbage. Information on how to sort waste and its importance was shared with participants and amplified through the CO’s and volunteers’ Instagram accounts with more than 750 reactions.

Goal 5: Every Child has an Equitable Chance in Life

Applying Evidence for Children:

To strengthen Belarus’ data use and monitoring capacity, the CO with national partners established a Data Portal on Gender Statistics and conducted an in-depth analysis of MICS6 data to better inform policymakers. Specifically, MICS6 data was used to measure Belarus’ multidimensional child poverty (MDCP), with the methodology presented to Belstat and the MLSP. The CO also established a dialogue with government partners on the preliminary assessment of expanded targeted state social assistance to vulnerable families with children, using the developed MDCP methodology as a tool. The inter-sectoral work has commenced to validate the indicators for MDCP. Findings will contribute to establishment of Belarus’ SDG indicator on multidimensional poverty.

Advocacy on earlier disability research resulted in Belstat’s inclusion of questions on children and adults based on the Washington Disability Group module into its quarterly household budget survey.

Budgets for Children

Child-focused expenditures were measured to strengthen four municipalities’ performance-based budgeting capacities for integrated state support and social services. These steps will promote a stronger dialogue at the local level among community members, making budgetary information more transparent and enabling greater understanding about child-focused activities funded from municipal budgets.

Adolescent Empowerment & Engagement:

Addressing adolescents’ online resource needs for self-learning and engagement, the CO established U-platform.by (U-platform). U-platform provides updated information about youth activities and
UNICEF volunteering opportunities, as well as access to educational courses. U-platform enables virtual space for youth workers to create content such as educational courses, event announcements, or articles.

To foster greater gender equity among adolescents, the CO with YWCA developed an online training course on gender issues for 15-19 years old boys and girls as part of the U-platform’s section, “Set up your gender lens.” An Instagram account, “Gender Lens,” was created to attract young people to participate in U-platform training as well as learn about gender issues relevant for youth. To-date, the account has had 20,100 visitors and more than 200 subscribers (90.7% women, 9.2% men).

The CO established an Adolescent Advisory Council to strengthen adolescents’ voice in UNICEF programming. Capacity building activities were conducted for members (8 males; 8 females), with steps taken to establish an action plan to co-create programme interventions in 2022.

Volunteers were important partners in adolescents’ engagement, with 664 people (448 females; 216 males) in the CO’s volunteer database. Participation in programming initiatives were expanded through child rights information sharing as “info-volunteers,” testing of CO online tools and participation in fundraising initiatives. Through V-Talks, 237 volunteers from 6 countries shared experiences, broadening awareness about the roles volunteers can take to make change for children.

**UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships**

In 2021, UNICEF continued building its partnerships among various communities to leverage resources and raise awareness for children’s rights.

To strengthen system coherence, UN agencies continued to coordinate COVID-19 responses through the UN social-economic response plan (SERP) with a working group co-chaired by UNICEF and UNDP. Under the MOH’s World Bank loan, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA and WHO supported procurement for PPE resources, medical equipment and medicines, with UNICEF’s share comprising over $1.7 million. Collaboration in development strategies enabled UN agencies to synergize individual mandates in joint projects focused on supporting the country’s work on SDGs and longer-term responses to the pandemic. Likewise, UNICEF in partnership with UNDP and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment conducted a national consultation with adolescents and youth on the draft National Action Plan (NAP) on Transitioning to Green Economy. As a result, young people were able to exchange their insights on the NAP as well as to set the stage for their further involvement as key partners in the NAP’s implementation.

While the value of funds and in-kind contribution in 2021 was $177,000, the CO adopted a much broader Business for Results Strategy, aiming at joint advocacy and co-creation of initiatives. The awareness raising and advocacy project, “#InternetWithoutBullying,” attracted more than 7.5 million views, spreading information on cyberbullying. Another business partnership supported the piloting of a family support service which resulted in a 35% reduction of children placed in baby homes in one region of Belarus. Likewise, a joint conference with a private sector partner created a forum to share UNICEF’s global recommendations for online-game producers. With opportunities to reach out to companies’ staff and clients as well as enhanced public information formats, these partnerships expanded child right messages to a broader portion of society. The increased opportunities for people to become involved in child rights also enhanced UNICEF’s overall reach and community engagement.

Another partnership strengthened in 2021 was volunteers with 664 in UNICEF’s database and 119 active, mostly comprising adolescents and young people (14-24 years). Volunteers have become more involved in programming activities such as: info-volunteers to share information on social media about advocacy campaigns such as “#InternetWithoutBullying” or “Family for Every Child;” testing
UNICEF’s legal aid application, Advokot, and the U-platform; and finally, participating in programme outreach to other adolescents in online webinars and school programmes.

The office initiated an Adolescent Advisory Council to integrate better adolescents’ voices in programme design and implementation. While the Council was only established in late 2021, members already pro-actively participated in presentations to peers and younger children on child rights and the history of UNICEF to commemorate UNICEF’s 75th anniversary. Partnering with adolescents to co-create programmes will support the office’s initiatives to respond better to specific needs of adolescents and young people.

### Lessons Learned and Innovations

Digitalization in Belarus is a key strategic development goal that was tested with the onset of COVID-19.

In 2021 the CO built on 2020 experiences of shifting to online programming modes, creating accelerated digital responses to enhance information outreach and access to services. For example, the CO developed an e-mental health platform to provide adolescents with information on mental health, self-help tips and access to confidential psychological counselling. To expand access to free legal aid, the mobile application, Advokot, was created for children and parents to learn about their rights through games and stories as well as reach lawyers for free consultations through a chat-bot. For adolescent participation and skills development, the U-platform was launched. Finally, with ECARO, the CO participated in developing the parenting application, Bebbo.

While these digital solutions have the potential to amplify opportunities for social inclusion and access to services, creation of the platforms and applications is not sufficient. In development of these devices, the CO learned several lessons that can improve future actions for better outreach and impact.

1. **Development of technological responses require commitment in budget and ‘uptake’ support from the project inception:**

   For a platform or application to be effective, the target audiences must first become aware of the tool and start using it regularly, recognising the continuous value in the information or service provided. This factor is particularly true for mobile applications that are easily deleted from devices when not regularly used. As the use of these tools is largely self-motivated, there needs to be a “hook” to keep the interest and uptake.

   In the case of Bebbo, the application provides practical parenting information that can be especially useful for new parents. Yet, the materials need to be updated regularly to maintain the audience’s desire to keep coming back to use it. The CO also learned this need with the development of Advokot, where the initial intention was that the application would serve to provide free legal aid to adolescents and their families. As the application was developed, it became clear that having only options for legal aid and some limited legal information would not be sufficient to keep the attention of adolescents to use regularly the application. As a result, the application’s capacities were broadened with different legal information and interactive games.

   The content is not the only factor keeping users active, it also needs to be presented in a user-friendly way. Awareness of the application combined with internal and external motivation generated by a promotional campaign may stimulate interest for one to download it, but if the material is hard to understand or to maneuver then there may be significant attrition. Once a user has been dissuaded in the use of the materials, it is unlikely that the person would try again to explore the application. In this case, lack of attention to the content and the usability of materials create the risk of “losing one’s audience group.”
These experiences underscore the need to plan both budgeting and human resources in the beginning of the project to ensure better uptake of the digital tools. With this learning, the CO has made an investment for 2022 to have a dedicated PR company to work with colleagues to promote the developed platforms and applications in a comprehensive and systematic manner.

(2) **Building services together with users to ensure greater response to actual demand:**

In designing the platforms and applications, it was important to involve the target audience. For the U-platform and the e-mental health platform, adolescents and young people were consulted from the beginning on the naming and structuring of the platform. In both platforms, adolescents and young people are also active partners in the implementation, with peer counselling designed in the e-MH platform and involvement of adolescents in projects and dialogue on the U-platform. Likewise, the Advokot application was tested by adolescents and young people. These processes better ensured that the digital solutions met the target group’s demands.

The importance of responding to client demand was exhibited in the CO’s Youth-friendly Health Centres’ (YFHC) outreach service, which proved to be a key factor in reaching adolescents including those from vulnerable groups. Specifically, the centres established ‘community spaces’ where adolescents could come to the centres without being obliged to take any actions; they could spend their time as they wanted -- socializing with other peers in the YFHC, familiarizing themselves with services in the centre, or participating in group consultations with specialists. This approach ensured that adolescents, including those potentially ‘at risk,’ felt comfortable enough to be able to come to the centre and be in a safe environment where they can decide when, or if, they are prepared to participate in services. At the same time, motivational consultations with outreach workers were available. Assessment of the integration of the outreach service revealed that YFHCs’ coverage of adolescents and young people doubled.

Strengthening evidence-based social behaviour change communication is critical for 2022. Simply providing target audiences with information or offering tools that are practical, but inconvenient, does not result in behaviour change or shifts in social norms. A focus on effectively identifying underlying key drivers of relevant behaviours, as well as psychological, socio-cultural or environmental bottlenecks influencing them, before designing tools and interventions is needed. Monitoring changes in sentiments and progress towards results with rapid assessments and social listening is also a priority.

To better match client demand with existing services, the CO in 2022 will collaborate with the ECAR Office and other Country Offices to explore how to use technology to identify target groups’ information and service needs to ensure more appropriate responses.