

Belize

Update on the context and situation of children

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued into the second year, 2021 witnessed a dynamically evolving and complex context with disruptions to essential services securing education, health and protection of the most vulnerable children and adolescents including those with disabilities and living in climate-sensitive areas. The socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 virus exacerbated the fragility of the economy with the gross domestic product (GDP) contracted by an estimated 15.5 per cent, falling to a level below the average of 7.9 per cent in the Caribbean. Subsequently, Belize was reclassified by the World Bank from an upper to a lower- middle-income economy.

With a population of around 420,000, over 42 per cent of whom are children; there is high levels of people living with vulnerability and poverty, and 60 per cent of this occurs among children aged up to 14 years. Poverty among children, adolescents and their families substantially increased, due to loss of jobs, livelihoods, and reduction of income. Poverty in rural areas is twice that in urban due to lower levels of education among heads of households, lower levels of participation of women in the paid labour market and disproportionate opportunities among ethnic minorities. The legislative and policy framework that supports the social protection system is limited, especially for children.

Despite the significant progress made in reducing child morbidity and mortality, health indicators are declining. Overburdened health systems strain to keep children healthy and well nourished. Increasing inequality heightens food insecurity for low-income and vulnerable populations with families resorting to unhealthy nutritional practices. The nutritional status of children under 5 years of age is at 4.6 per cent are moderately and severely underweight, 15 per cent are moderately and severely stunted, and 7.3 per cent are overweight. Malnutrition rate amongst adolescents is high with 35.8 per cent of 13-15-year-olds overweight and 12.5% obese (MICS 2015).

Mental health disorders and overweight are the leading causes of non-communicable diseases among adolescent boys and girls. Attempted suicides are prevalent among adolescents aged 10 to 14 years at rate of 36 percent. Measuring of mental health at the population level (MMAP) remains critical to identify and provide targeted response.

Important efforts were made by the Government to ensure learning continuity. However, the COVID-19 pandemic remains particularly disruptive to learning, with school closures affecting more than 108,000 children and adolescents. Girls and boys have limited access to quality inclusive education due to inconsistent quality standards, compromising learning outcomes and school retention. Relative wealth status, geographical location and ethnicity influence school participation and exclusion. While 86 per cent of primary school teachers are adequately trained in pedagogy; 89 per cent lack the skills and competencies to effectively deliver the preschool and lower-primary curriculum at the early childhood level, especially amongst rural areas and indigenous boys and girls.

In Belize, 96 per cent of the population have access to safe water. However, disparities exist, especially in rural areas. Proper sanitation and hygiene facilities in schools are grossly inadequate, particularly for girls. Schools report an unreliable water supply and use untreated water and lack bathroom access for children with physical disabilities.

Climate change threatens coastal communities affecting 50 percent of the population. Hurricanes, flooding, sea-level rise, ocean warming, coastal erosion, coral bleaching, drought and changes in weather patterns, continue with a projected spike in frequency and scale. Natural disasters have brought unprecedented flooding, impacting over 30,000 individuals, and losses estimated at US\$80 million in 2020, and a drought-induced crop loss estimated at \$50 million in 2019. Belize requires a

climate-smart ecosystem that includes strategies for continued access to basic social services in times of shocks and emergencies. Notwithstanding strong efforts of the Government to respond to natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic, there is limited integration of shock-responsiveness mechanisms into the national social protection system.

Crime and violence gravely threaten peace in Belize. Gangs have created an epidemic of violence, which compromises quality of life for residents, exposes youth and children to trauma, and kills or injures hundreds of people annually. Belize consistently ranks among the top 10 most violent countries in the world, with more than 80 per cent of murders being gang related. Girls and boys experience frequent and multiple forms of physical, emotional and verbal abuse. Sexual violence is highest among girls aged 10 to 19 years, and pervasive domestic violence remains one of the gravest manifestations of gender inequality.

2021 witnessed a significant spike in human mobility across the region including Belize, of persons who escaped violence and lack of opportunities in their own countries. These flows are heterogenous in origin, age and gender, but mainly from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. An important 2021 milestone has been the declaration of an amnesty for irregular migrants and asylum seekers in Belize. This will be a critical area of support for UNICEF in the coming year, especially as it pertains to access to basic social services for children, with heightened risk in the migration train.

Social norms that accept and promote violence in homes and communities; laws permitting parents to punish their children; a lack of parental knowledge and support to adopt alternative discipline; and the prevalence of substance abuse and lack of positive coping mechanisms remain a challenge. The threat of abuse, exploitation and violence has significantly increased due to the pandemic's impact. Children are sometimes unable to access fair and equitable justice because they lack legal support, adequate information, coordinated and standardized services.

The evolving context provides important opportunities to leverage partnership, advance the cause of children, foster greater efficiency in public financing and important private sector investment especially with mobile companies and financial institutions. A recent high-level meeting on Early Childhood Development leveraged, BZ\$2.7 million (equivalent to US\$1.35million) from the Government of Belize. Additionally, around one million BZ\$ dollars was committed by the Government to the new UNICEF Country Programme for 2022-2026. The new CPD was endorsed by the Government and is aligned to the MSDCF and the Decade of Action and Acceleration to address the SDGs and emerging issues.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Increased Investment in Early Childhood Development

In 2021 UNICEF continued to be the lead development partner in positioning and advancing the ECD agenda in Belize in collaboration with the national ECD Technical working Group. In December 2021, at a high-level meeting termed, the San Ignacio Declaration, with Government ministries in Education, Health, Human Development and Economic Development, UNICEF leveraged the development of an inter-ministerial Early Childhood Development National Strategic Plan for the period 2022-2030, to a cost of BZ\$2.7million. The Government ministers committed to the development of an ECD policy, improvement of infrastructure, formation of an ECD commission, and expansion of ECD services.

Support to COVID-19 response and strengthening of cold chain system

An important contribution was the support provided to the implementation of the COVID-19 response plan, which centered on. planning and coordination, strengthening the health system with the development of the National Vaccine Deployment Plan, and enhancement of the cold chain system at national and sub-national levels. UNICEF procured cold chain equipment for 44 health facilities, to support community-level services in the 192 rural communities and 9 urban centers impacting 30,000

children. Some 233 CHW were trained as community advocates reaching children and their families at household level. UNICEF delivered to MoHW 100,800 COVID-19 vaccines through the collaborations for UN COVAX facility and supported direct procurement of 148,800 doses through the African Union (AVAT). As a result of these efforts, 209,416 people (almost 50 per cent of the total population) were reached with vaccines.

UNICEF in collaboration with AstraZeneca Young Health Programme, supported the National council for children and families and partners to catalyze a global advocacy movement led by, and for, young people aged 10-24, to promote prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and healthy lifestyles. These initiatives included material development and peer-to-peer engagement, both offline and digital (Nex'Us), around mental health, proper nutrition, and health fitness.

Social protection System Strengthening and response to COVID-19

As part of the continued response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF continued to support the government in the implementation of the Belize COVID-19 Cash Transfer Programme (BCCAT), prioritizing poor families with children, pregnant women, persons living with a physical disability. In total, the programme reached almost 21,400 households. Building upon the initial investment for the development of a social protection strategy and the establishment of a social protection floor in Belize, UNICEF, in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO), engaged the new administration on the comprehensive Social Protection Expenditure Review (SPER) and its key recommendations. A draft cabinet paper was jointly developed with the Ministries of Human Development (MHD) and Economic Development (MED) for the establishment of the social protection floor in Belize, which has informed the development of the joint UN (UNICEF/ILO/WFP) SDG programme, “Building a resilient Belize through universal, adaptive and sustainable social protection” and human security programmes.

Poverty and data collection

In 2021, the Statistical Institute of Belize completed a 2018/2019 Poverty Study, which highlighted the increased poverty, especially among children (60 per cent). As a complement, UNICEF developed a comprehensive child poverty study based on secondary data, to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on children and the attendant monetary and multidimensional implications. Additionally, UNICEF provided technical and financial support to the inclusion of poverty and migration modules in the bi-annual Labor Force Survey (LFS). Both studies are critical to positioning children in the development of the first national multidimensional poverty index (MPI) planned for 2022.

Resource mobilization

An important shift in 2021 was strategically positioning UNICEF in the COVID-19 response with important partnership with COVAX and AVAT for the provision of vaccines and strengthening the cold chain system. Though health was not a priority or outcome in the existing country programme, being flexible, creative and adaptive in positioning UNICEF as a partner of choice, resulted to an addition US\$1 million in cash and kind allocated to the programme with nationwide impact. Furthermore, the office received extra funding of US\$924,000 from UNICEF Global Support, which contributed to the strengthening of the national cold chain system, and risk communication and community engagement Initiatives. The Belize CO also successfully participated in two major appeals in the area of social protection. In line with the new national plan, Plan Belize, and Medium-Term Strategic Goal Areas, UNICEF, together with ILO and WFP, designed the joint programme, “Building a resilient Belize through universal, adaptive and sustainable social protection”, articulated around two main pillars, – economic recovery and poverty alleviation, under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Small Island Developing States (SIDS) initiative. This successful submission will grant around US\$720,000 to Belize for economic growth and poverty alleviation in the context of COVID-19 recovery, of which US\$230,000 will be allocated to UNICEF for a two-year period. In parallel, the three agencies developed a joint programme under the Human Security Trust Fund (HSTF), to mobilize additional resources and expand the scope of the SDG fund proposal, with an estimated US\$300,000. A comprehensive Resource Mobilization strategy was developed to explore opportunities

for additional contribution to support achievement of the results of the new country programme 2022-2026.

Strengthening National Capacities:

UNICEF made important investments in strengthening the capacities of actors within the child justice system. Over 500 actors including law enforcement officers, court officials, social workers and immigration officers have been trained on basic child rights and gender, best interest principles, child friendly justice delivery, child protection in migration, and child friendly interviewing. Furthermore, UNICEF in collaboration with the Ministry of Home Affairs and New Growth Industries and the respective Security Forces of Belize implemented the integration of training on child rights and gender modules within their respective academies. These trainings targeted officers across the country, both urban and rural areas and among various rankings. These officers interact with children daily and with new gained capacity, the officers are expected to deliver child friendly justice, provide children with diversionary services, responsible interviewing, and utilize right-based approaches when dealing with children. This will continue to be rolled out in 2022.

In the education sector, several courses on the newly developed Teacher Learning Institute (TLI) were offered to teachers and administrators. The platform was created by the Ministry of Education in August 2021 for teachers to have continuous access to professional development during the pandemic. UNICEF supported the delivery of courses focused on transitioning back to school, psychosocial support and mental health, WASH and remedial interventions. One successful course offered was Positive Behavior Intervention and Support Systems that trained 790 teachers which positively benefitted 45,000 children. An additional 150 teachers were trained in Menstrual Hygiene Management, benefitting 2500 adolescent girls from 25 primary schools and 25 high schools nationwide.

The country office also supported the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology in navigating the challenges to education in the pandemic. Key contributions included providing guidance on strategies for safe return to schools through advocacy at the policy and technical levels of the national COVID-19 education taskforce. The Special Envoy for Women and Children was also engaged by UNICEF as a key advocate for championing the safe reopening of face-to-face learning.

UNICEF's communications support was integral to the national advocacy on the vulnerabilities affecting children within the COVID19 context. This included continued advocacy on reopening schools; raising awareness on the long-term impact of learning loss; heightened vulnerabilities in nutrition; and exposure to violence, abuse, and safety. Additional communication efforts focused on reducing the stigma and discrimination of mental health among adolescents and youth, increasing parenting support to tackle the challenges of the pandemic, dispelling myths and misinformation on the COVID-19 virus and promoting vaccine equity, efficacy, and trust.

In 2021, UNICEF acted as a coordinator for the efforts around reforming the child justice system, by bringing together a multi-disciplinary team to work on common interventions. UNICEF worked with the government to undertake policy dialogue on laws, policies, implementation mechanism and accountability for access to justice for children in these reform areas. This contributed to Cabinet approving the repeal of the Certified Institution's Act in Belize and the development of protocols for judicial and law enforcement officers to utilize when children interact with the justice system on status offences.

UNICEF Belize received US\$680,000 from BPRM funds through HAC, which contributed to the implementation to achieve multi-sectoral activities under child protection, GBV, education, ECD, and Monitoring and Evaluation. Initiatives focused on reaching migrant families in Belize, including migration mobile centres with provision of a comprehensive package of services: psychosocial support and counselling, legal, birth registration, education and health services; and capacity building.

Violence prevention including GBV: During the reporting year, UNICEF Belize maintained its partnerships with the Ministries of Human Development, Families and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs (MHDFIPA), and Home Affairs and New Growth (MHA) to strengthen the social workforce systems and the definition of protocols and programmes to respond to sexual violence within the security forces.

The Ministry of Health and Wellness, the National Commission for Families and Children and United Nations Refugee Agency were strong partners in achieving the advocacy priorities of 2021. Campaigns on COVID-19, migration and education in the pandemic benefited from these collaborations to win support for the cause of children. Supporters' engagement was also expanded to include campaigns by the United Nations Youth Advocate, and national social influencers and opinion leaders. The Probitas Foundation and AstraZeneca worked with Belize to promote life-saving work in the areas of health and education on non-communicable diseases for children and young people. To date one round of trainings have been hosted on the platform and 175 young people were trained in mental health, physical fitness and nutrition.

Efficiency and Effectiveness

In 2021, the office established full return to office through a hybrid flexible modality within the evolving context of the pandemic. This provided an opportunity to continuously streamline and enhance digital-based systems (including DocuSign, SharePoint tools, Google Drives and Microsoft tools) and maximized utilization of operational platforms such as Microsoft teams and zoom for trainings, workshops and meetings not only at national but also sub regional and regional level . This contributed significantly to business continuity in a more efficient, effective and agile manner. The Go Green initiative introduced in 2020 will continue to be improved in fostering a climate-friendly working environment.

The Way Forward

The UNICEF 2022-2026 CPD articulates important shifts and will address emerging issues specifically around return to learning including remedial education, curriculum reform and digital transformation; regaining health indicators with a focus on primary health care; addressing violence against children and women including gender-based violence; shock responsiveness especially as it pertains to the frequency and scale in climatic conditions. This will be addressed through clearly defined change strategies driven by evidence, results, innovation, a robust monitoring and evaluation framework and resource mobilization strategy.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Key partnerships were fostered with PAHO/WHO to roll out and monitor the national vaccine deployment plan, COVAX vaccine supply, training, and capacity building of health personnel and RCCE. As a result, the UNICEF CPD 2022-2026 includes a pillar in support of primary health care and the joint participation at the two-year management and operational plan of the Ministry of Health and Wellness, 2022-2024.

The Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry of Human Development, with the strategic guidance of the Senior Advisor to Office of Prime Minister spearheaded the social policy agenda. UNICEF has strengthened its partnership with ILO and WFP as part of the development of the SDG and Human Security proposals on social protection/shock-responsive social protection in Belize. Collaboration continued with SIB for the development of modules on poverty and migration in preparation of the national Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), as well as the child poverty study.

Under the leadership of UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP held the first joint national stakeholder's consultation to dialogue with development partners about improving UN contributions and strategies

for the new CPD 2022-2026 for the three agencies. The process was facilitated virtually on UNICEF's Nex'Us platform. This partnership has furthermore been instrumental in advancing joint initiatives around Spotlight, gender-based violence and climate change.

UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees signed the first joint migration work plan to prioritize actions to improve the situation for families and children in Belize. Joint advocacy including the Resident Coordinator's Office contributed to the declaration of an Amnesty by the Government of Belize for migrants.

UNICEF facilitated the convening of the Ministry of Education and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to advance plans for curriculum reform within the COVID-19 context and reimagining education.

The adolescent development and participation agenda partnered with the Government of Belize and the National Commission for Families and Children on children's participation. Children and young people advocated their rights through the National Children's Parliament, the Sustainable Child Friendly Municipalities Initiative, the Nex'Us Platform and U-Report. In engaging the private sector to initiate Business for Results (B4R), UNICEF signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) with Speednet Solutions (Smart) and Belize Telemedia Limited, for the provision of 600,000 free SMS to support U-Report and youth engagement.

In strengthening the response to GBV, alliances, partnerships, and collaborative spaces were expanded through inter-agency interventions with sister UN Agencies, such as UNFPA, UNHCR, OHCHR. New partnership was established with the National Women's Commission (NWC) to enhance the community-based response for violence against women and girls, including shelters for victims of human trafficking. UNICEF Belize expanded its partnerships with civil society organizations, including the engagement of two networks – Go Belize CSO Hub, and the Belize National Indigenous Council (BENIC).

The media were key partners in amplifying the voices of children on awareness days, including World Children's Day and the UNICEF's 75th anniversary. UNICEF Belize worked with UNICEF USA and UNICEF UK to coordinate opportunities for visibility.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Strengthening its digital transformation agenda:

Adapting the Programme within an evolving COVID-19 pandemic context, the office strengthened its digital transformation agenda with Apps, tools and platforms developed and scaled up for virtual engagement with partners at national, subnational and community levels. The Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) under the extended L3 emergency were instrumental in fostering adaptive processes in responding to emerging needs, especially around mental health, gender-based violence, teacher training and migration. These initiatives ensured that children, adolescents, parents, teachers, social workers and civil society organisations amongst others were reached and engaged via SMS, social media, phone, webinars and U-Report.

Supporting Duty of Care and staff wellbeing:

Critical to the overall functionality of the office was the continued support to staff wellbeing, anchored on the organizational culture and values of Care, Respect, Integrity, Transparency and Accountability. The national adaptation of team core values and reinforcement of the Office mantra of assuming good intent became a corporate best practice with the Belize Country Office being amongst the top 20 country Offices globally during the mid-year pulse survey. Staff check in shifted from an institutional guidance to a built-in culture. Regular online fun sessions, special wellness days, practice of happiness

calendar and whole change management sessions were core to building a strong and committed team. This was pivotal in the results achieved for children and for the first time developing PSNs, CPD and CPMP in house for the new country programme 2022 -2026.

Establishment of Long-Term Agreements:

As part of the Annual Management Plan prioritization of efficiency this year, the country office shifted from a needs-based procurement system to a more strategic approach through the establishment of long-term agreements (LTAs). These included media production companies to provide video, photography, graphic design, broadcasting and streaming, editorial and social media services; procurement of emergency and programme supplies; and vehicle rental services. The companies applied through a competitive bidding process and were vetted by a joint team from UNICEF, United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO)/WHO (World Health Organisation), and the United Nations Resident Coordinator Office (UNRCO). To date the LTAs have been a key contribution to the Business Operating Strategy (BOS) of the UN system in Belize with significant improvement in the procurement process, supporting the efficient delivery of products and services.

Governance and systems:

In 2021 office governance mechanisms were comprehensively reviewed and updated to strengthen programme delivery and operational support. Based on the country office size and typology, the membership of the statutory committees and focal points delegation were updated with an all-inclusive approach with considerations for existing and new staff, gender, and Young UNICEF. In addition to the quarterly Country Management Team (CMT) meetings and monthly Programme Management Team (PMT) meetings, bi-monthly management meetings were held to address and mitigate significant risks to the achievement of the established results within the COVID-19 context. Standard operating processes were revised to increase effectiveness and efficiency, especially in integrated monthly travel plans, cash forecasting tool, and consolidated supply plan. Proactive actions to improve staff well-being and security were informed by reviews of and revisions to key guidance and protocols, including COVID-19 measures within the office and in the field. In addition, the office developed a comprehensive information and communications technology (ICT) strategy and workplan to strengthen support, capacity, and the infrastructure available to the country office.

Technology for Development (T4D):

In the realm of technology for development (T4D), the Belize Country Office worked closely with partners developing capacities and implementing key tools for improved feedback from, and in support of, young people. Key initiatives included the development of the Nex'Us platform, a web-based system for coordinating, promoting, and engaging young people on issues that impact on their rights and wellbeing. Support for U-Report is ongoing, with infrastructure being laid to improve the platform's SMS interface. Core telecommunications companies have signed a memorandum of understanding with UNICEF, supporting with free communications on the platform. UNICEF also provided digital support to the Ministry of Health and Wellness, focusing on vaccination delivery and reporting systems.

Learning and Development, inclusive of knowledge sharing sessions as best practice:

In fostering a continuous learning environment, the office has dedicated knowledge sharing sessions on Fridays, covering ICT updates and tools, review of key HR policies, and the CPD process. This was appreciated by staff members and endorsed as a best practice for continued learning and development. In addition, stemming from the results of the pulse survey, the Learning & Training Committee (LTC), in coordination with the Local Staff Association (LSA) hosted three Change Management sessions with a consulting firm, enabling the staff members to highlight corporate culture strengths and areas for improvement. The DISC profile analysis was introduced and identified as a tool to understand the different personalities and work styles. The office benefited from these sessions

in building the team-spirit among staff members. Elaboration of key learning concepts and latest findings of the pulse survey results from December 2021 will be further incorporated into the development of staff members at the staff retreat scheduled for January 2022.