

Congo

Update on the context and situation of children

In 2021, the 2nd year of the UNICEF CONGO programme of cooperation was implemented in a context dominated by the persistence of the COVID-19 epidemic, and of an economic and financial crisis with direct effects on the social wellbeing of the population, particularly the most vulnerable, including women and children.

According to the World Bank, the Congo real GDP, which contracted by 7.9% in 2020, would have contracted an additional 0.1% in 2021. The debt situation, on the contrary, has improved. Total public debt represented 84% of GDP at the end of 2021 against 103% in 2020. This progress has contributed to improving the negotiations between the Republic of Congo (RoC) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). After a status quo for two years, an agreement was reached between the IMF teams and the Congolese government in November 2021, culminating in the signing of a thirty-six-month Extended Credit Facility (ECF) agreement for approximately US \$455 million between Congo and the IMF in January 2022.

On the economic front, Congo remains dependent on oil, which represents more than half of GDP and more than 80% of the country's exports. The diversification of the economy is yet to pick-up, resulting in an economic recession. However, in this difficult context, the social situation remains worrying, especially for children and women who live in the most at risk communities and in poor urban areas. Indeed, according to the World Bank, GDP per capita fell by 10.3% in 2020 and the poverty rate increased by four points in one year, going from 48.5% in 2019 to 52.5% in 2020. With 47% of its 5.5 million inhabitants under the age of 18, around 104,000 additional children and adolescents are estimated to have fallen below the poverty line in 2021. To tackle this situation, the government approved the 2022-2026 National Development Plan (NDP), which prioritizes investments in new sectors such as forestry, and aims to provide adequate responses to each of the dimensions of the crisis.

On the political level, the country re-elected President Denis Sassou Nguesso for a fourth consecutive term with 88.4% of the vote. Following this election, Mr Anatole Collinet Makosso, former Minister of Primary and Secondary Education and Literacy, was appointed as Prime Minister. The new Government is committed to prioritizing institutional, economic, and financial governance, as well as social welfare.

In terms of access to child rights, evidence built in 2021 draws a panorama with progress as well as new challenges. According to a 2021 UNICEF nationwide study on access to health services, about 10% of households reported not having had access to health care due to COVID-19. This risks of jeopardizing hard-won progress in immunization and maternal health. Furthermore, the focus of domestic resources for COVID-19 has meant a decrease of government funding for the Vaccine Independence Initiative (VII). This has seriously compromised the purchase of vaccines in 2021, which has led to vaccines shortages, particularly regarding measles and yellow fever. The scarcity of domestic resources makes intersectorality even more strategic by integrating vaccination, nutrition and water and sanitation interventions in health centres.

Further to the evidence on Gender-based-violence (GBV) in schools, and online violence, in 2019, new evidence on child protection shows that access to child registration remains a challenge, particularly for the most vulnerable populations, and that gender-based violence and trafficking remains highly unreported, affecting children of all ages but primarily adolescents. For example, results released in

December 2021 from UNICEF studies carried out on GBV in 8 regions showed high prevalence of rape amongst children: out of 583 cases of children under 18 received in health facilities, 551 (94.5%) were victims of rape, and at the police stations, 148 of the 312 cases of children under 18 (47.4%) of GBV reported, were also due to rape. This evidence confirms the need to continue to build evidence that informs future UNICEF engagement to support the Government to ensure Children's rights to live in an environment free of all forms of violence, and the attainment of results for Key Result for Children 5 (KRC 5).

Although, 74 per cent of the national population have access to basic water service, only 46 per cent of the rural population has access to basic water supply compared to 87 per cent for the urban population. Despite advocacy, in 2021, UNICEF remains the only partner of the government working in rural sanitation. Behavior change initiatives in rural basic sanitation promotion is very limited. The national policy for water and sanitation has been validated at the technical level but remains to be endorsed by the Government. The Country Office (CO) and partners continue their advocacy to this end. The RoC has no existing framework for the management and maintenance of the rural water points.

Congo is still exposed to various humanitarian situations, such as the recurrent annual floods, refugees, and asylum seekers from the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The country is also exposed to various epidemics, including the current pandemic of COVID-19, measles, cholera, polio, yellow fever, and remains at high risk of Ebola virus disease (EVD). The COVID-19 pandemic has affected from 14 of March 2020 to 31 December a cumulative total of 21,277 persons confirmed positive COVID-19 cases, with a cumulative death toll of 369 persons, of which 3 children aged 10 to 19 years. The effects of this pandemic are mainly economic and social, with direct effects on the social wellbeing of the population, particularly the most vulnerable, including women and children. UNICEF targets a total of 3.2 million people in the two COVID-19 high-risk main cities of Brazzaville and Pointe Noire (where nearly 60 per cent of the country population resides) with preparedness, prevention and/or response activities.

Major contributions and drivers of results

The CO continued to support the Government of Congo to promote equitable development that is conducive to the realization of children's rights, while supporting equitable access to basic social services and the reduction of inequalities. The country programme is conceived through a life-cycle approach which has enabled to develop a multi-sectoral approach and synergies between Goal Areas in the framework of the KRCs.

For the first decade of life, the Child Survival and Development (CSD) programme supported the Government's efforts to maintain access to and continuity of health and nutrition services and their synergies with the WASH sector, particularly WASH in health facilities and WASH in schools. The main aim is to improve access to high-quality and equitable maternal, neonatal, child health and nutrition services for children aged 0 to 10 years by strengthening multisectoral service delivery systems and building national capacities to provide an essential package of high-quality, high-impact, integrated services throughout the first decade of a child's life, including the first 1,000 days.

In the area of immunization KRC 1, significant progresses have been made in improving the Congo's storage capacity through the provision of 183 solar refrigerators and 10 ultra-freezing equipment. However, Penta 3 and RR1 coverages remain a challenge. Indeed, only about 1 out of 5 health districts has achieved at least 80% coverage for Penta 3. UNICEF has supported the 52 districts for a national catch-up vaccination campaign in the framework of the Mother and child Health Week in October, which, according to partial data, allowed to vaccinate, approximately 27,592 children under one year of age for Penta 3. As a result, the vaccination coverage in the targeted areas increased from 69% to 86%.

To revitalize routine immunization, UNICEF has undertaken three key actions: 1) a situational analysis of the performance of routine immunization and identification of key bottlenecks; 2) the development of a software package using RapidPro technology to identify coverage gaps by health area with a focus on unvaccinated children; 3) an advocacy for the creation of a specific budget line for immunization, which allowed the Government to reimburse the Vaccine Independent Initiative (VII) mechanism at the end of 2021. In turn, this will facilitate the purchase of vaccines for 2022. Based on these analyses, a model for improving immunization coverage has been developed and will be implemented in 2022. The main bottleneck has been the weakness in implementing advanced strategies for immunization services and this was worsened by the vaccines shortages during the 3rd quarter.

Nutrition programme performance Key Result for Children 2). indicators are generally good. The recovery rate for children aged 6-59 months with severe acute malnutrition is 75.72%. This recovery rate is greater than 75% which is the acceptable threshold rate according to Sphere standards. In addition, the death rate is 0.46% which is acceptable because less than 10%. The main challenge remains the lack of recent national data on the burden of SAM. Consequently, UNICEF supported technically and financially the MoH to conduct a National Nutrition SMART survey in 2021. This survey evaluated nutrition, food security, and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the utilization of maternal and child health services. The analysis is still ongoing by the Ministry of Health. To strengthen malnutrition prevention, screening activities and essential family practices have been integrated into the package of activities of community health workers. UNICEF also supported the implementation of a Mother and Child Health week that incorporated and delivered the integrated package of services for the first 1,000 days.

In addition, the CO also supported the Government to fill the institutional gap related to the Early Childhood Development (ECD) by developing a multisectoral national ECD policy expected to be endorsed in 2022.

Regarding Maternal and newborn health, a conceptual framework for the implementation of an integrated model for quality-of-care improvement has been developed. Its community component, which focuses on the operationalization of the national community health strategy, is being implemented in two pilot health districts of Pointe Noire, where 60 community health workers have been trained and equipped to manage the three main killer diseases of children and promote essential family practices. These community health workers correctly managed 2,804 children suffering from diarrhea and 468 children suffering from pneumonia, which represent respectively 51% and 59% of received cases

Task-shifting being a proven strategy to increase coverage of PMTCT services, UNICEF supported implementation and scaling up of the task shifting strategy, coupled with the Point of Care strategy. As a result, the number of pregnant women tested for HIV increased by 139%, from 10,491 in 2020 to 25,129 in 2021, and the percentage of infants born to HIV-positive mothers benefiting from an early diagnosis of HIV (PCR tests) increased from 2% in 2019 to 7% in 2020 and to 10.3% at the end of September 2021.

For the second decade of life, UNICEF's country programme aims at ensuring that school-age children and adolescent boys and girls, especially the most vulnerable, receive adequate services, learn, and develop in a conducive environment free from violence and abuse. Also, to create an environment in which children and adolescents, aged 10 to 18 years, are protected and free from violence, exploitation, and abuse. Three priorities guided the support of UNICEF for adolescents programming in 2021: 1) the prevention and elimination of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in schools and online, 2) the improvement of learning outcomes through the introduction of the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) initiative, and 3) the creation of an enabling environment for adolescents' development, participation, and empowerment.

The strategies used to advance KRC 4, were system strengthening, service delivery, capacity development and advocacy. In 2021, UNICEF continued to support the roll-out of the 2021-2030 Education Sector strategy. Together with its partners, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Education to strengthen the national education system through 1) the development of an Action Plan for the prevention and control of gender-based violence in schools and online; 2) the piloting of the FLN initiative in Pointe Noire and Brazzaville by supporting the development of assessment tools for students and teachers at primary schools and the training of primary school administrators and teachers; 3) the provision of personal protective equipment against COVID-19, and 4) the provision of teaching and learning materials.

In Child Protection (KRC 5), the CO focused its efforts on generating evidence with the implementation of two studies related to children on the move and/or victims of child trafficking, and on children living in streets. The study on children's victims of trafficking and exploitation is the first of its sort and follows the identification of several cases of child trafficking in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, as well as the strengthening of the policy environment in 2020. Preliminary results show that from 2017 to 2021, 146 children were formally identified as victims of trafficking, with an average age of 16 years. Boys represent 81%, compared to 19% for girls. Also, school aged children represent 87%, of which 56% at primary level and 31% at secondary level. The non-educated represent 13%.

In addition, the results from studies showed high prevalence of rape amongst children as presented above. As a result, advocacy at technical and political level now highlights the prevalence of GBV among children under 18 years old and with the high proportion of sexual abuse amongst girls. Evidence has also guided the reinforcement of the referral system from the community to the police, health centers and legal services and a more important involvement of the Ministry of Gender in management of cases of violence against children.

These results show the importance to continue supporting the Government to build evidence on child-right violations and to further develop the existing integrated child protection system put in place in 2015 in Lékoumou and Brazzaville. An analysis of this system is being carried out with support from the regional office.

As a contribution to KRC 7, the CO also provided technical support for the validation of the civil registration modernization policy 2021-2025, which received financial support from UNHCR. In the framework of the SDG Fund joint programme, 3,722 indigenous children were registered and will receive their birth certificate early 2022.

The cross-sectoral approach between Education, Protection and Adolescent Development which in 2021 suffered from insufficient funding, allowed for increased collaboration and interoperability, to tackle the burden of gender-based violence in schools and online in an integrated manner. In 2022, this collaboration between Education and Child Protection sectors, mainly on "the safe to learn" initiative will continue to increase resources mobilization and achieve better results for children in Congo.

In the framework of Generation Unlimited, under the leadership of the Ministry of Youth and in partnership with UNDP, more than 20 young people, boys and girls benefited from an incubation program to implement projects that tackle issues affecting their lives and generate positive impact in their communities. Projects focused on improving education, on bridging the technology gap between boys and girls, on promoting agricultural best practices, on protecting the environment by reducing plastic waste and finally on giving a voice to girls and women especially those who are victims of sexual abuse to report and use available services.

The WASH programme continued to support the Government's efforts to increase access to safe WASH services for all the population. As such, efforts towards achieving results for Key Result for

Children 8 were multisectoral and benefitted children of all ages. UNICEF supported the development of water facilities in most remote areas in the Northern part of the country. As a result, 13,354 people, including 3 682 indigenous people, have access to safe drinking water. Sanitation services remain weak with only 20% of the national population having access to basic sanitation (JMP 2021). UNICEF continues to support sanitation and hygiene promotion in schools and provided a full WASH component to 720 children including 205 indigenous children in two rural remote departments. An additional 1,407 children gained access to sanitation with a menstrual health component. As a result of UNICEF's advocacy, RoC became an active member of the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) partnership and can access SWA's catalytic funds, which were leveraged to promote mutual accountability. Additionally, water and sanitation became a priority for adaptation within Congo's updated Nationally Determined Contribution for COP26. This initial step is contributing to strengthen the synergy between the WASH sector and climate action initiatives.

In the area of Public Financing for Children (PF4C) the office continued to undertake evidence-based advocacy to ensure that girls and boys in the most vulnerable areas are benefitting from inclusive social policies and increased resources. Two budget briefs for the Education and Health sectors were developed and, for education, advocacy through an information and sensitization session took place with the Minister of Education and his cabinet. The meeting made it possible to have a common understanding of the challenges and perspectives for the sector. This advocacy session contributed to strengthen the engagement of the Government during the global education summit held in July 2021 related to the increase of the share of the Education sector from 17% to 20% by 2023. However, the allocation of domestic resources remains a challenge. Spending for social sectors was well below the planned budget. For health, for example it was 14% and for education 17%. The country made no disbursements for sanitation (KRC 8), and the 2022 budget does not contemplate any domestic disbursements in this area. This makes it difficult to reach the SDG targets for sanitation as well as for the sustainability of results.

UNICEF supported the national polio campaign. One of the main achievements was the use of 20 young bloggers to manage social mobilisation and misinformation. A Facebook, TikTok and Twitter pages were created for the purpose. These activities continued three months after the campaign in support of routine immunisation

Congo submitted its report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2020 but has still to receive the response. UNICEF will support the Government to put in place the recommendations.

To overcome the burden of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF supported the implementation of distance learning through the development of a digital learning and distribution of school manuals to 142,609 students, the training of 869 teachers with no access to internet connectivity and supporting learning via radio and TV. The CO supported an innovative approach for students in urban areas through distance learning, mainly home-based learning, through WebTV and YouTube and to support a safe school reopening, 135 schools were provided with soaps and handwashing facilities reaching at least 9,733 children. Also, 315 children (173 boys and 142 girls aged 6 to 17) living with a hearing or cognitive disability in specialized centers in Brazzaville and Pointe were sensitized on COVID-19 prevention and provided with psychosocial support, and 6,570 women and girls (3,483 under 18) living in Likouala and Plateaux regions were sensitized on Gender-based violence (GBV) prevention.

UNICEF Congo provided humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations, including children, high-risk groups, host populations, refugees, and asylum seekers (from CAR and DRC), affected by floods in the northern part of the country in Cuvette, Likouala, Plateaux, and Sangha regions and by COVID-19. As a result, 375,448 people were sensitized on Ebola, COVID-19, and cholera while 4,493 children have been identified with SAM and referred for treatment, and 36,138 people received essential water, hygiene, and sanitation supplies. UNICEF continued to support the Ebola Preparedness and COVID-19 activities. Infection Prevention and Control (IPC)/WASH Kits (handwashing devices and soap) were installed in 195 public spaces in the seven high-risk Ebola districts along the river corridor with

DRC.

UNICEF provided technical and financial assistance to improve refugee children's access to quality basic education in the Likouala and Plateaux regions. A total of 59 teachers (12 female) were trained on the basics of teaching French and mathematics for students to ensure quality learning for refugee children and an educational support package aimed at improving school completion and success rates was provided to 5,029 refugee students (2,654 girls and 2,375 boys). As part of WASH in Schools, 40 schools and 9,575 students (4,487 girls and 5,088 boys) in Makotimpoko and Bouemba (Plateaux region) benefited from handwashing soap bars for a period of 6 to 9 months supporting efforts to promote hygiene and respect of COVID-19 preventive.

Furthermore, UNICEF Congo has strengthened the capacity of government counterparts (including 44 technical staff from various ministries), implementing partners and other humanitarian actors in the multisectoral approach to emergency preparedness and response.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

To align with the UN reform guidelines put in place on January 1, 2019 and at the start of the process of the development of a new NDP 2022-2026, the UN Country Team (UNCT) has decided to update its existing common country assessment, the conclusions of which will serve as a basis for updating the cooperation framework.

UNICEF continued to partner with UN agencies to achieve results for children in the framework of the 2020-2024 UNDAF. With WFP and WHO, UNICEF continued the implementation of the SDG Fund Joint Programme to improve the living conditions and access to social protection of indigenous peoples in the Lekoumou region. This tripartite partnership made it possible to pilot an integrated approach to programming and to strengthen the bilateral partnership at field level. The multi-year partnership with the World Food Program (WFP) relating to school canteens, with financial support from the McGovern Dole project, has contributed to improving learning outcomes with a multisectoral approach in education, WASH and nutrition. In the framework of the Global Partnership for Education, UNICEF partnered with UNESCO to enable students to access distance learning through the Home School Web TV, radio and online. This helped improve the success rate in national exams to 80.98% in primary school certificate (CEPE) and 82.68% in certificate of low secondary school (BEPC). UNAIDS continues to be a privileged partner on HIV within UBRAF, alongside UNDP as the implementing partner for Global Fund grant.

Examples of partners

The country office continued to mobilize resources by maintaining donor trust, ensuring timely donor reports and visibility and handover ceremonies were held with Gavi, the Government of Korea, and USAID. In 2021, the number of key donors included Global Partnership for Education (GPE), Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance, USAID, Government of Japan, World Bank, BPRM, UNDP-MDTF, Andorran National Committee, the government of South Korea. UNICEF Congo raised US \$ 13,059,714 in 2021. In collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce, UNICEF Congo organized an advocacy meeting with 19 private sector companies which contributed to sensitizing them on children's rights and paved the way for a strategic partnership to reach the most vulnerable children.

The CO also uses advocacy opportunities to engage the private sector. In the framework of "Reinventing Education," and the regional partnership between UNICEF and Airtel, the country office and Airtel Congo will continue to support the Government in this field starting in 2022. Total, an oil company, participated in a dialogue with children alongside the Minister of Social Affairs on World Children's Day is now exploring partnership opportunities, as is Credit du Congo following a

collaboration during the polio campaign. Interest from the private sector for collaboration with UNICEF exists and requires a more systemic approach in 2022 to achieve concrete results.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Considering the national context characterized by the health, economic and social crisis, as well as the changing programmatic environment, it appears necessary for the CO to adapt the programme to changes in the environment.

For one, the GoC has revised its strategic planning for the next five years with the development of a new National Development Plan 2022-2026 which priority is the diversification of the economy. The focus on investments for new sectors of the economy has placed the social sectors not as a pillar of the NDP but as cross-cutting accelerators for development. This may have hindered the visibility of children in sectoral planning and reporting with implication for UNICEF in terms of advocacy with Government and other UN agencies to ensure that children and social services are prioritized in the collective support to the Government to reach the SDGs.

Thus, in 2022, among other actions, operational planning with sectoral ministries will need to be strengthened to ensure that sector priorities are well translated into budgeted actions to be implemented. In addition, the current number of prioritised KRCs may be reduced to focus on high-impact ones that can benefit from adequate funding and have a ripple effect on other key interventions for children.

However, the focus on economic diversification is an opportunity to support quality education (KRC 4) with a focus on readiness to access higher or technical education and employability. At the same time, the development of new economic free zones will imply population shifts with implications for the provision of basic social services in these areas and improved mechanisms at sub-national level to monitor the situation of children and ensure full access to all their rights, including the right to live in an environment free of all types of violence.

Another lesson learned relates to the lack of reliable data and evidence which remains a challenge in Congo. The last major national survey, the MICS, dates from 2015 and surveys planned since 2018 such as the Population Census and the Demographic Health Survey could not be carried out due to lack of funding. Despite the efforts made by the partners, in particular UNICEF, to have data on the situation of the most vulnerable populations, the production of quality data, including administrative data, remains a challenge.

This was highlighted by Government officials as a challenge in the elaboration of the 2022-2026 NDP and, as a result, the Ministry of Telecommunications has put forth plans to strengthen the capacity of line ministries at sub-national level to report administrative data using digital means. UNICEF partially offset this situation by generating evidence generated in health and child protection. Although this has helped strengthen UNICEF's position as a knowledge leader with Government and partners, it is insufficient to have a holistic analysis of the situation of children and of progress towards the SDGs.

To address this situation, it is important for UNICEF and its partners to continue to engage in high-level advocacy and capacity strengthening of the National Statistics Institute, as well as of line ministries, to promote a culture of data generation, including the promotion of innovation for real time monitoring and use of evaluations to track results and monitor the impact of programmes on the most vulnerable. To do this, the office needs to identify academic and other partners to partner with them to accompany the Government to generate the needed evidence. Also, more efforts need to be made to turn evidence into concrete action at policy and operational levels.

In terms of UN coherence, UNICEF played a leading role in the planning and coordination of the UNDAF as lead agency for the Human Capital pillar, which comprises Health and HIV, Nutrition, Education, WASH and Social Protection, as well as for the Operations Management Team (OMT). Although coordination mechanisms with other UN agencies are fully operational, such as the UNCT, the Programme Management Team and the OMT, efforts are still needed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of coordination between the office of the Resident Coordination and UN agencies both in programmatic and operational approaches.

The office improved financial management through increased oversight by the Country Management Team, and establishment of monthly review of indicators as well as ensuring adherence to procedures and functioning of statutory committees. The office also reinforced the capacity of staff in operating VISION. As a result, the office achieved 99.7% expenditure level, zero DCTs of over 9 months and 100% completion of spot checks and programmatic visits, an improvement and increase from the previous year. Capacity building coupled with regular oversight of grant management will continue in 2022. As part of the Duty of Care (KRC 12), the office continued to provide an internet connection to all staff until 30 June 2021 to facilitate teleworking. These good practices will continue in 2022.

Finally, the mid-term review of the UNDAF and the UNICEF CPD in 2Q 2022 is the occasion to review if shifts are needed in the country programme although, the end-of year review with Government highlighted the relevance of a country programme founded on the life cycle approach that supports the Government to strengthen its capacity to deliver results at the the enabling environment conducive to advancing child rights (upstream level), as well as its capacity to offer universal quality services and increase demand from right holders for these services (downstream). The office, however, needs to reinforce its capacity to generate evidence and better results in demand generation and integrate RCCE in programmes in a more systemic manner. This will also be the occasion to engage with government in the establishment of a multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms in the framework of the UNDAF