

Oman

Update on the context and situation of children

2021 was significant for Oman's development agenda with the launch of Vision 2040, the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan 2021-2025, and the rollout of *Tawazun*, which is charged with implementing Oman's Medium-Term Fiscal Plan (MTFP) 2020-2024. The MTFP aims to achieve a fiscal balance in the medium term and works towards reaching the objectives set out in Vision 2040 to diversify the economy away from hydrocarbons while developing human capital and building a high-capacity workforce. Under the MTFP, a 5 per cent Value Added Tax (VAT) was introduced this year along with subsidy cuts. To mitigate the impact of the reforms on the most vulnerable, Oman started work to design a new integrated and comprehensive social protection system.

The population slipped to 4.42 million in September 2021 as expats continued to depart[1]. Of the total population, 62.9 per cent are Omanis and 37.1 per cent are expatriates. Young people aged 0-19 years make up 32.2 per cent of the population, while young people aged 10-29 make up almost 32 per cent [2].

Oman's GDP per capita stood at \$12,659.9 at the end of 2020[3]. Oman ranks 60 on the Human Development Index, indicating very high human development. The country's economy is highly dependent on oil and gas, however the share of hydrocarbons' contribution to public revenues is declining – falling to about 71 per cent in 2021 – as the Government of Oman puts in place measures to widen the tax base and reduce the dependency.

Oman's economy recovered in 2021 from the previous year's collapse in oil prices and the economic crisis resulting from COVID-19 thanks to rising oil prices and external demand, and growth in the non-hydrocarbon sector. The fiscal deficit and government debt, which jumped in 2020, are projected to improve considerably over the medium term as the authorities implement the MTFP.

Oman provides free universal health coverage to citizens, thus out-of-pocket expenditures on health are low – estimated at 1.04 per cent of total expenditure. Affordable essential medicines are available in 100 per cent of health facilities with 20.1 physicians per 10,000 people.

The infant mortality rate (IMR) dropped to 7.6 per 1,000 live births in 2020 from 120 in 1972; the under-five mortality rate (U5MR) dropped to 9.3 from 180 in the same period. Neonatal mortality also declined. However, young child malnutrition is a concern. The child stunting rate is 11.4 per cent, the child wasting rate is 9.3 per cent and 3.1 per cent of children are overweight or obese. [4] Sub-optimal feeding practices are contributing to this; exclusive breastfeeding stood at 23.2 per cent. Maternal nutrition is poor, as shown by the rate of newborns with low birthweight (11.7 per cent) and the anaemia rate amongst pregnant women (29.3 per cent).

Oman's Early Child Development (ECD) index rate is 68 per cent. Data shows a sharp decline in the number of children enrolled in ECD facilities after they re-opened following a 9-month closure due to COVID-19: 2,886 children were enrolled in the first quarter of 2021, down from 10,954 children in first quarter of 2020.

Oman achieved universal primary education and continues to improve in secondary education enrolment (99.6 per cent in 2020[5]). Gender parity increases in favour of girls as children progress from grades 1 to 12. However, there are issues related to education quality and its alignment with labour market requirements. National and international assessments show learning outcomes below expectations and sizeable disparities between students from different wealth quintiles, and between

urban and remote areas. Significant investments are required to ensure integration of students with disabilities within mainstream education. Oman has prioritized education reform to improve the quality of education, its relevance to the labour market and sustainability.

The legal framework for child protection is relatively robust. Child Protection Committees (CPCs) have been set up to prevent and address child abuse. Oman expressed its commitment to prohibiting all corporal punishment of children, which is illegal at school. Reporting of child rights violations is mandatory. In 2021, 1,507 cases of abuse were reported to the CPCs. The most vulnerable children are those with disabilities, who are 3.6 times more likely to be victims of physical violence. With many education and social activities moving online during the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been a reported increase in cyberbullying. Cases of abuse may also not have been picked up in schools, as they would have been otherwise, as facilities closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Oman offers a range of policies to empower people with disabilities and offers specialised and mainstream services for children with disabilities to achieve their potential. Enhanced cross-sectoral coordination is essential for impactful early interventions for children. Data on children with disabilities is limited and disaggregated data in line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) requirements is missing, as are comprehensive data systems on child disability. Oman's E-Census 2020 indicated that around just 1 per cent of Omani children between 0-17 years old, or 10,880 children, have a disability.

COVID-19

The first anniversary of the COVID-19 outbreak was 24 February 2021. By the end of December, there were 305,357 cumulative cases including 4,116 deaths[6]. By yearend, Oman had administered 6.08 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines. A total of 93 per cent of the target population, or 3.1 million people, had received one dose and 86 per cent of the population, or 2.9 million people, had received two doses so far. A total of 55,085 people, or 2 per cent of the population, had also received a booster dose. The Government recently approved the Pfizer vaccine for children aged 5 and above. There is a high rate of vaccination of teachers and children above 12.

[1] National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI)

[2] Population 2020, NCSI

[3] World Bank

[4] Oman National Nutrition Survey 2017, Ministry of Health and UNICEF

[5] <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/om>

[6] Ministry of Health data

Major contributions and drivers of results

The National Committee for Family Affairs (NCFA) gained standing this year, boosted by new the Minister of Social Development who is its chair, and became a key cross-sectoral body with which UNICEF engaged. NCFA endorsed UNICEF's strategy and workplans as well as the new Country Programme Document (CPD) 2022-2025, while coordination of implementation continued through the Programme Management Group (PMG)[1].

2021 represented the final year of the current programme cycle. An external evaluation of the 2017-2021 programme was conducted and found that UNICEF made successful short- and medium-term contributions for children, especially as part of the reform process, advancing Vision 2040 goals, boosting ownership of results by Government and mobilizing resources for fulfilling UNICEF's mandate in a high-income context. The evaluation also found long-term results varied by sector depending on buy-in at department and even individual level. Evaluation findings informed the design

of the new CPD 2022-2025, which was approved by the Executive Board in September 2021.

Throughout 2021, UNICEF and partners continued to achieve progress in prioritised outcome areas:

- Outcome 1. Enhancing children's potential: By 2021, children of all ages have more equitable access to quality services in protection, education and health, and enhanced opportunities to realize their full potential.
- Outcome 2. Making data work for children: Data disaggregated by age, sex, disability, governorate and income are used effectively in planning, monitoring, policy and practice related to children and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Results achieved ensured better outcomes for children in Oman, in line with UNICEF's Global Strategic Plan Areas 1, 2, 3 and 5, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the 2030 Agenda.

A wide range of strategies were employed to achieve at-scale results for children, aimed at addressing equitable financing for quality social services, institutional capacity and policies, and behavioural and social norms. UNICEF focused on strategic, high-impact interventions that can have catalytic effects.

UNICEF worked on harnessing the power of evidence generation to impact change for children. The fiscal space analysis (FSA) for the health and education sectors was finalized and validated by the Government. Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) and Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) programming was informed by evidence for tailored and targeted interventions, and data gathered through social media listening informed the office's social media strategy as well as strategic Government communications about COVID-19. The work to re-open ECD centres was deemed to have strengthened the sector in the long-term thanks to new monitoring mechanisms put in place. UNICEF also supported the design of a new social protection system to mitigate the impact of fiscal consolidation measures on the most vulnerable.

Winning support for the cause of children from decision makers and the wider public using an integrated advocacy approach, the UNICEF brand was strengthened through social and traditional media. UNICEF's social media accounts continued to attract followers and engagement, and a key milestone was the launch of a dedicated website in July.

Efforts to generate support from Government, civil society, the private sector, and academia for the youth agenda was successful, with partners showing considerable enthusiasm for this new area of work. World Children's Day and UNICEF@75 events proved successful with widespread local media coverage and an appreciation of UNICEF's convening role from all who took part.

Goal Area 1: Every Child Survives and Thrives

IECD is a key programme area that aligns with Oman's commitment to SDGs 2, 3, 4 and 5, as well as national development plans.

In June, UNICEF concluded its project supporting the Ministry of Social Development to safely re-open ECD facilities and nursery schools, benefitting approximately 20,000 children. After developing re-opening guidelines in 2020, UNICEF efforts in 2021 centred on providing technical support for implementation and monitoring of the guidelines by the government in facilities across the country. An assessment to evaluate the re-opening process concluded that the work will likely have a positive impact over the longer-term because of the establishment of enhanced governance structures, including sub-national monitoring teams, new monitoring tools and the introduction of regular monitoring milestones. The assessment, however, also revealed a dramatic drop in children enrolled in ECD

facilities after the 9-month closure caused by COVID-19. Solutions presented to reverse this situation include raising awareness about the importance of ECD among caregivers, the provision of materials to support ECD within the home, and financial support for ECD centres. As such, and in line with a national SBCC strategy developed with UNICEF support, UNICEF and the SBCC Task Force identified IECD as a critical component of its first SBCC campaign. UNICEF continued to disseminate messages via its social media channels to promote positive parenting practices – particularly in regard to the secondary impacts of COVID-19 such as mental health, online bullying and cyber security.

Goal Area 2: Every Child Learns

The 2021-2022 academic year saw the resumption of in-person learning and when schools re-opened in September, teaching was able to take place face to face in 90 per cent of cases. UNICEF and the SBCC Task Force developed a back-to-school campaign that addressed the safe return of students to their classrooms. UNICEF continued advocacy efforts around the importance of re-opening schools and the prioritization of teachers as part of vaccination efforts.

Separately, UNICEF continued to provide regular COVID-19 risk assessment updates based on the epidemiological situation to the ministries of health, education and social development.

In May, the Ministry of Education held an *Education Loss Symposium*. UNICEF, participating with UNESCO, used the opportunity to advocate for priorities around education recovery, including the importance of enrolling children back in school and providing tailored services to meet their learning, health and psychosocial needs; the need to support catching up on lost learning; the importance of equipping teachers with essential skills to address learning losses and to incorporate digital technology into their teaching. UNICEF also developed a thought piece to support the Ministry with the re-opening of schools and some of the long-term thinking around education recovery. Recommendations focused on strengthening education during the context of the ongoing pandemic and building back better by developing teacher capacity, provision of MHPSS services for children, use of technology for innovative learning, and improved planning, monitoring and evaluation practices.

To enhance quality of education and promote adolescents' civic engagement and school-to-work transition, UNICEF assisted the Ministry of Education in operationalizing its *National Framework for Future Skills*. UNICEF reviewed the framework and provided guidance on how to best operationalize the framework to ensure that it is streamlined into existing efforts and curricula at the Ministry with a focus on application rather than theory. UNICEF also provided insights on ensuring alignment with the MENA life-skills and citizenship initiative.

Meanwhile, UNICEF undertook steps towards establishing the Generation Unlimited (GenU) initiative. Much of the groundwork involved data collection and analysis. In addition to the Situation Analysis on Youth and Adolescents with UNFPA, UNICEF developed a landscape assessment identifying major challenges and opportunities for young people across the four GENU dimensions (gender was a major lens through which the work was conducted). UNICEF developed a GenU roadmap to guide the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and partners on the way forward. The roadmap identified effective initiatives in Oman and how these can be scaled up for results. UNICEF drafted a GenU investment case to support advocacy with public and private sector partners. In parallel, UNICEF worked on development of an implementation plan and curricula for a youth training programme[2] to be launched as one of the flagship GenU initiatives.

Work concluded on support for mainstreaming of inclusive education through establishment of a core group of trainers at the Specialised Teacher Training Institute, ensuring that the training is institutionalised into existing professional training programmes. UNICEF also provided technical inputs to the development of a national action plan for the inclusion of children with disabilities in the education system, under the leadership of the Ministry of Education. UNICEF highlighted the importance of aligning the plan with work taking place on the establishment of a functional disability

assessment system. UNICEF also identified key elements that would need to be considered in the plan should the Government wish to develop a long-term financing strategy.

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

Protection of children from violence is a national priority that aligns with the National Childhood Strategy 2015-2024, the Child Law as well as the country's commitment to international conventions and SDGs 1 and 10.

UNICEF support for development of a cross-sectoral case management system (CMS) for well-coordinated care across IECD, protection and inclusion of vulnerable children was concluded with clear recommendations for a nationwide scale-up by the government, following conclusion of piloting in two governorates. To build the capacity of the key workers implementing the CMS, UNICEF designed a programme to train a core team of social workers from the ministries of health, education and social development in using the case management tools. This core team will go on to train 60-70 others in using the tools across all governorates.

Responding to the Government's request to add a mental health component to the CMS, UNICEF supported the ministries of health, education and social development with equipping 57 social workers, counsellors and nurses with key skills required for the provision of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services to children, adolescents and parents. Graduates of the programme – who come from across Oman – will train other mental health practitioners and service providers, thereby contributing to a stronger overall care environment in schools.

Goal Area 5: Every Child has an Equitable Chance in Life

Classification tools for early identification of functional disabilities in children were adopted by the Ministry of Social Development and other relevant sectors for roll-out by the government nationwide. UNICEF equipped master trainers with critical knowledge and skills to implement related tools and ensure that the functional disability classification approach is rolled out to social workers across the country.

The classification tools developed with UNICEF support assess children from birth to 18 and move away from the medical model of disability classification to a social model that is aligned to key childhood development milestones. Cross-sectoral efforts to mainstream these tools across the health and education sectors continued, with the government considering implementation of the tools during well-baby check-ups at primary healthcare facilities, in nurseries and pre-schools, and in schools. The approach will result in earlier detection of disabilities, giving children the chance to receive relevant care early on, and providing them with the opportunity to catch up with their peers. Early detection will also ensure that children with disabilities are accurately captured in routine data collection, informing coverage and quality of specialised care and education services.

As part of its fiscal reform, the Government is redesigning its social protection system with the overarching aim of mitigating the adverse effects of the economic slowdown and fiscal reform measures (i.e. subsidy cuts and VAT) on vulnerable households. UNICEF supported the reform with the aim of making the system shock responsive, integrated, comprehensive and affordable, ensuring a decent standard of living for all. UNICEF work covered: conducting a vulnerability assessment to determine the poverty line for Oman using a relative poverty measurement; conducting a mixed method assessment to determine gaps in the current social protection system, which complements the design of the income support system; developing a policy brief for the design of a single registry which will be integrated into the overall policy framework for social protection; developing a “cash plus” proposal to be taken forward by the Government – this identified services to complement income benefits; finalizing a comprehensive policy framework for social protection linking social protection to

human capital development, economic growth and the national development framework; and developing financing scenarios outlining for the Government the best mix of options to finance the new social protection system.

Cross Cutting Work

SBCC

The SBCC Task Force finalized and approved a cross-sectoral SBCC strategy. This prioritizes 23 behaviours that are critical to driving IECD, EVAC and inclusion of children with disabilities. The first nationwide SBCC campaign, planned for the first quarter of 2022, will focus on VAC and IECD. Educational videos will address the issues of corporal punishment, neglect and online bullying, while promoting the availability and benefits of ECD services. In finalizing the strategy, an important principle was the promotion of gender equality in the provision of childcare and overcoming existing gender stereotypes.

UNICEF disseminated messages on its social media channels encouraging positive parenting in the context of COVID-19, reaching more than 190,000 accounts via Instagram and Twitter. The Task Force continued to use the #ForOmansChildren hashtag to promote cross-sectoral awareness on social media.

As part of UNICEF's Accountability to Affected Populations' strategy, the Office conducted social media listening to gather information about the public's perceptions about the COVID-19 response. The feedback was used to refine messages and identify population groups for follow-up messaging. To build capacity among Government counterparts, UNICEF organized a four-day workshop for the SBCC Task Force on media engagement to raise awareness in a sensitive way about VAC, ECE and inclusion. Local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and media houses also attended.

RCCE work focused on addressing misinformation relating to COVID-19 and vaccines and encouraging vaccine uptake. It also addressed the secondary impacts of the outbreak.

Evidence Generation and Data

UNICEF continued work to strengthen administrative data systems with a focus on child-related SDGs and capturing data on the most vulnerable. As described above, the development of the unified disability classification system will further strengthen administrative data on children with disabilities.

UNICEF made progress in its Public Finance for Children Work (PF4C), finalizing an FSA for the health and education sectors. The FSA looked at financing challenges facing the two sectors in the medium to longer-term amid fiscal consolidation. It explored financing solutions for quality and sustainable health and education services provision from Islamic Finance and Corporate Social Responsibility sources, efficiency savings and public-private partnerships. After the Government requested additional follow-up analysis, UNICEF brought in a team of senior economists to support this activity; this will continue in 2022, when Government partners are expected to agree on key areas of efficiency savings with the highest return.

In parallel, UNICEF will develop budget briefs to assess the performance of the budget for the two ministries over the past five years with a section on children's allocations. Going forward, Government assumptions around the new tax regime, subsidy reform and international outlook of the oil market will be used to update the FSA using the financial programming framework. Different elements of the work will inform the Medium-Term Budget Plan for Health and Education by June 2022 and will eventually inform the budget submission for the fiscal year 2022/2023. UNICEF is also building technical teams' capacity across the three ministries.

[1] Comprised of representatives from the ministries of education, health, social development, and the National Centre for Statistics and Information, the PMG acts as the programme steering committee.

[2] Known elsewhere as the UPSHIFT initiative

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Throughout the year, UNICEF worked closely with other United Nations agencies to drive results for children in Oman. UNICEF partnered with WHO on a communications campaign to address vaccine misinformation and promote vaccine update. UNICEF continued to work with UNFPA on the Situation Analysis of Youth and Adolescents, as well as other preparatory groundwork for the launch of the Generation Unlimited initiative in Oman. A new partnership this year was with the International Labour organization (ILO). At the request of the Government, UNICEF and ILO partnered to work on reform of the social protection system.

UNICEF also continued to strengthen its partnerships with Government ministries, with the NCFA emerging as a key body for strategic coordination. UNICEF maintained close relations with the ministries of education, health, social development, and the National Centre for Statistics and Information through the PMG. The SBCC Task Force remained the main locus for the SBCC and RCCE work. The PF4C and social protection work served to deepen the relationship with the Ministry of Finance and *Tawazun*[1]. UNICEF also deepened relations with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth to advance Oman's youth agenda. Worked focused on evidence generation and laying the groundwork for rolling out the GenU initiative.

As part of celebrations for World Children's Day and UNICEF's 75th anniversary, UNICEF organized roundtable discussions between the ministers of health and social development, as well as with members of the State Council. These were deemed particularly successful and Government participants expressed the desire to make these discussions annual events. The meetings also garnered good coverage in the local media. In organizing the events, UNICEF ensured equal gender representation among child participants.

UNICEF continued its engagement with the private sector through bilateral partnerships and the UNICEF Business Leadership Circle (BLC). This year, the BLC provided critical inputs on youth programming – i.e. the development of the GenU initiative as well as the youth training programme. Beyond the BLC, UNICEF moved to engage with more private and public sector companies in Oman to mobilize resources for the youth training programme. On World Children's Day, UNICEF also organized a job shadowing day with Omantel to support young people in developing critical workplace skills.

During the reporting period, UNICEF also renewed its alliance with Children First Association (CFA), a local NGO. CFA reaffirmed its commitment to supporting the Government and UNICEF's joint SBCC programme. UNICEF also expanded its interactions with local CSOs by inviting them to the SBCC media training which was well received.

[1] Government programme mandated to develop a medium-term fiscal consolidation plan to address the budget deficit and work on its implementation.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

UNICEF in 2021 continued to embrace new opportunities arising out of the COVID-19 outbreak, while at the same time accelerating results under existing initiatives. During the reporting period, the Country Office also developed its new CPD 2022-2025.

A major new area for UNICEF Oman since 2018 has been its Public Finance for Children (PF4C) work. UNICEF's approach to PF4C was prepared and executed over several years to ensure its strategic relevance to the Government. As mentioned above, it culminated in 2021 with validation of its Fiscal Space Analysis (FSA) by Government officials.

UNICEF's approach to PF4C work offers some key lessons.

During the initial phases of the PF4C strategy, it was essential that UNICEF position itself as a credible player in public finance management. This consisted of several activities including networking, capacity building within UNICEF and of external Government stakeholders, and sustained advocacy.

Through close engagement with relevant partners in the public and private sectors, UNICEF was able to identify its entry point to PF4C work and was successful in identifying the right policy questions to support the Government think through solutions. Rather than focus on children alone, UNICEF focussed on social sectors first, which created an opportunity to later focus on children specifically.

The importance of forging strong relationships with critical actors, such as the Ministry of Finance, Tawazun, and the Ministry of Economy, that UNICEF had not traditionally engaged, became apparent early on and allowed for the necessary joint collaboration as well as access to information and data necessary to carry out the analysis.

Throughout the PF4C strategy implementation, UNICEF Oman also continued to scale its capability in PF4C by training existing staff, hiring internal experts, and relying on UNICEF's global network of PF4C expertise. This allowed the Office to further nourish its relationships with the Government in this new area and to demonstrate its ability to deliver significant added value to strategic Government business.

As a result, UNICEF was able to make good on its promises and commitments. Going forward, the success of UNICEF's engagement with PF4C will also depend on its ability to support the Government in finding workable solutions to its current challenges. A follow-up programme of embedded support to the macro-fiscal unit in Tawazun, will provide the opportunity to further work with the Government to formulate practical answers to the strategic challenges it faces.

Recognition of the PF4C work prompted the Government to invite UNICEF to participate in the design of the new social protection system. This gave UNICEF considerable leeway to advocate for the development of a system that is flexible, efficient, comprehensive, sustainable, and integrated; that leaves no one behind; and that provides adequate social assistance and a decent standard of living for all.

The redesign of the social protection system was designated a national priority of the highest order. This enabled ministries to work together effectively and efficiently, and the Government – especially the ministries of finance/*Tawazun*, social development, housing, labour and Awqaf (Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs) – demonstrated high levels of ownership and drive to deliver results. The new social protection system will be presented to His Majesty Sultan Haitham in the first quarter of 2022. The provision of technical support to the Government in redesigning the social protection system as well as continued support to mitigate fiscal consolidation are incorporated as continuing priorities into the new CPD.

Programme adjustments to accommodate emerging Government priorities in the wake of COVID-19 demonstrated the flexibility and responsiveness of the Country Office as well as that of its staff. The ability of UNICEF to provide the support required by the Government continued to underscore its relevance in a high-income context, the strength of its technical know-how and ability to convene international experts by tapping into its global network to focus on high-impact, upstream activities.

UNICEF's experience throughout the year demonstrated again the importance of effective and efficient multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms to drive forward results for children.

As UNICEF is strengthening its engagement in the area of youth programming, also in line with the new CPD, UNICEF was successful in setting up a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) to ensure the systematic and meaningful engagement of young people in the decision-making process of Generation Unlimited in Oman. The enthusiasm demonstrated by the 15 or so young people on the YAB was most encouraging. However, it also became apparent that a more general governance structure is needed to ensure proper coordination and encourage ownership of the GenU work.

The recognition of UNICEF's work in new and strategic programmatic areas has led to the development of a CPD that is highly relevant to the Government's Vision 2040. UNICEF will seek to build on these gains to accelerate results for children at the national level.