Update on the context and situation of children

This report summarizes progress in 2021 under the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL)-UNICEF Country Programme of Cooperation (CPC) 2020–2023. The CPC is an integral part of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2020–2023 which sets out UN contributions to GoSL’s efforts to achieve: (1) the African Union’s Agenda 2063 and (2) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with its principle of “Leaving No One Behind” as domesticated in Sierra Leone’s Medium-Term National Development Plan (MTNDP) 2019-2023.

Changes with Implications for Child Rights

Considerably less restrictions on movement and economic activity were implemented by GoSL in response to COVID-19. This compares to 2020 when school closure for six months slowed the pace toward achievement of sustainable access to education and improved learning outcomes for all children. In 2021, schools remained open and health services were accessible all year. Economic growth rate rebounded from -2.0 per cent in 2020 to an estimated 2.9 per cent in 2021. Domestic revenue mobilization improved from 13.3 per cent of GDP in 2020 to 15.3 per cent in 2021. Recurrent expenditure increased by 20 per cent in 2021 when compared to 2020, with social sector spending, especially education, being the major beneficiary.[1] This, along with contributions from key donors, improved the fiscal space to fight COVID-19 in 2021. Rising fuel prices and depreciation of the local currency led to an increase in prices of essential commodities including food, a situation Government is trying to ameliorate with a Quick Action Economic Recovery Programme.

In this enhanced operational and fiscal space, GoSL, with the technical assistance of UNICEF and other partners, better integrated COVID-19 response measures into development programming to strengthen the humanitarian-development nexus and fight the pandemic more effectively and efficiently while simultaneously driving sustainable development for children. The enabling environment for the progressive realization of child rights in Sierra Leone was strengthened and Government’s political will to address related issues was demonstrated in 2021 with the passage of a Breastmilk Substitutes (BMS) Act, adoption of a National Radical Inclusion Policy for schools[2], approval of an Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD) Policy, and several national strategies.[3]COVID-19 vaccines became available in March and vaccination started immediately. Despite the commitment of GoSL and partners, the target of vaccinating 40 per cent of the population by December was still in view by the end of the year. While vaccines are widely available, vaccine hesitancy remains. A stronger link between service delivery, risk communication and community mobilization initiatives are needed to improve vaccination in 2022, in an environment where routine health and other basic services for children and their families continue uninterrupted.

Situation of Children:

Sierra Leone has a young population with 48 per cent of its 7,534,981 people below the age of 18. The country faces a number of challenges, with 59.2 per cent of the population living in poverty, while [4] under-five mortality rate has continued to decline but remains one of the highest in the world at 108 deaths per 1,000 live births.[5] Stunting among under-five children fell to 26.2[6] per cent in 2021 from 31.3 per cent in 2017[7] and 29.5 per cent in 2020.4 However, food insecurity affecting 4.7 million people in 2020[8] and a deterioration in Food Consumption Score during 2021[9] are threats to further progress in the reduction of child stunting, morbidity, and mortality.

The Government of Sierra Leone’s Free Quality School Education Programme (FQSE) launched in
2018 has helped to increase total enrolment of children by 36 per cent when the figures for pre-primary, primary, junior secondary school (JSS), and senior secondary schools (SSS) are combined (1,984,493 in 2019[10] vs 2,697,590 in 2021[11]). Learning outcomes also improved in 2021 with 77 per cent of children passing the National Primary School Examination compared to 74.1 per cent in 2020.[12] Early marriage, teen pregnancy, and gender-based violence (GBV)[13] remain challenges despite GoSL’s political will to combat them. Twenty-one per cent of young women aged 15-19 years are already mothers or pregnant with their first child and 86.5 per cent of children aged 1-14 years in Sierra Leone experience some form of violent discipline in their households.[14] Eighty-three per cent of women aged 15-49 years have undergone female genital mutilation, which is more common in rural areas compared to urban areas (89 versus 76 per cent).4

Polio, measles and fire outbreaks during the year and the threat of Ebola and Marburg virus diseases from neighbouring Guinea were effectively handled and prevented from escalating into crises with adverse implications for advancement of child rights. Efforts in this regard were used as an opportunity to strengthen health and humanitarian response systems.

[1] 2021 and 2022 budgets statements by Member of Finance in budget speech to Parliament, and summary excerpt by Ministry of Finance. All sources can be found on MoF website - www.mof.gov.sl
[2] The policy aims at ensuring that no child is left behind. It, among others, reopened school attendance to visibly pregnant girls.
[6] Preliminary Results - 2021 Sierra Leone National Nutrition Survey
[13] Sierra Leone is ranked number 182 of 189 in the Human Development Index of 2021/22 and 155 of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index this leaves the country in the same place as in previous years
[14] Sierra Leone Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2017

Major contributions and drivers of results

The following highlights main achievements of the GoSL-UNICEF CPC (2020-2023) in 2021 starting with the four West and Central Africa Region (WCAR) Key Results for Children[1] (KRCs) which UNICEF-Sierra Leone has committed to as catalytic priorities for achievement of the SDGs i.e., Equitable and sustainable access to education for all children (KRC3), Improved learning outcomes (KRC4), Accelerating efforts to reduce, prevent, and respond to child marriage (KRC6), and Accelerate birth registration (KRC7).

Gross enrolment in pre-primary programmes for children aged 3 to 5 years in Sierra Leone, an important driver of school preparedness, which is in turn one of the key drivers of increased school
enrolment (KRC3) and improved learning outcomes (KRC4), increased from 19.3 to 20.6 per cent between 2020 and 2021.[2] These figures indicate that the CPC target of 15 per cent by end of 2023 has already been achieved but the figures are still low in the equity-sensitive context of leaving no child behind. To further increase pre-primary enrolment, 30 new Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres were built in 2021 under the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), with 29 additional centres in the pipeline for 2022.

The CPC target on transition rate from primary to the JSS (81 per cent) had been achieved by end of 2021 with a figure of 97.6 per cent (up from 94.4 per cent in 2020) with more girls (at 98.1 per cent against a CPC target of 83 percent) transitioning than boys (at 96.9 per cent against a CPC target of 79 per cent).[8] KRC4 target of 75 per cent or more by end of 2021 was thus achieved though transition rate from JSS to SSS fell from 93 to 83.2 per cent between 2020 and 2021.[11] This is receiving critical analysis to help understand the situation and reverse it. Completion rates for primary education increased from 79.6 per cent in 2020 to 83.8 per cent in 2021. In a demonstration of the use of evidence-based strategies to drive results, an update of a study of out-of-school children (OOSC) completed in 2021 confirmed poverty, school-related gender-based violence, teen pregnancy, and disabilities as some of the key barriers to children’s access to education and informed the development of a National OOSC Strategy. The strategy, to be implemented in 2022, will accelerate reductions in OOSC in the spirit of leaving no child behind.

Another important achievement for Improved learning outcomes (KRC4), was UNICEF support to the Government for the National Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA). The EGRA/EGMA 2021 showed improvements from the 2014 assessment, and will be used to strengthen ongoing ECD programming, teacher training and contribute to important education sector policies and planning, in view of strengthening children’s learning of basic reading and numeracy skills in first through third grade. UNICEF will continue to support the Government in 2022 in the dissemination and use of the findings of the EGRA/EGMA, as well as continued early grade teacher training.

On reducing, preventing, and responding to child marriage (KRC6), UNICEF continued support to the National Secretariat for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy (NSRTP) for implementation of the National (costed) Strategy for the Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Marriage (2018-2022) meaning that the KRC target in this area has since been met. Nevertheless, the strategy will be revised in 2022. In alignment with the Communication and Advocacy Strategy developed in 2020, radio programmes were broadcast in seven districts to raise awareness on ending child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and gender-based violence (GBV). Working with GoSL and Civil Society Organization (CSO) partners, progress was made in evidence-generation to guide and strengthen social norms programming with a view to driving down harmful practices, including child marriage.

In support of accelerating birth registration in Sierra Leone (KRC7), UNICEF supported the National Civil Registration Authority (NCRA) and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS) to strengthen linkages between the health system and birth registration by building the capacity of district civil registrars and health workers to register children at the point of birth and promoting awareness to increase demand for birth registration while continuing to build foundations for scaled-up use of a digital platform (including handheld devices) for the notification and registration of births. By end of the year 2021, 97 per cent of births (127,076 out of 131,032) notified by the MoHS were successfully registered by NCRA. However, only 29 per cent (37,157 out of the 127,076 registered births) were issued with birth certificates, a situation as in previous years, caused by limited availability of certificates and customary time lags between births and the naming of children[3], among others. Addressing demand and access barriers to registration, and the causes of the gap between number of children registered and proportion receiving certificates are areas for major work in 2022. The KRC target of 80 per cent birth registration for children under one year is yet to be achieved although the target on an inter-operable system with health has been achieved.
Beyond the KRCs to which UNICEF Sierra Leone has committed, key results were achieved in relation to child and maternal health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, and social protection. Such results are, based on the relevant theories of change (ToCs), designed to act cross-sectorally to directly drive achievement or support other higher-level initiatives (including programming at scale) to indirectly help achieve child-related SDGs and the MTNDP targets.

Results were achieved in child rights advocacy through UNICEF 75 commemorations, which inspired visualization of the situation of children through media and public engagement activities.

UNICEF supported GoSL to start implementation of the 2021-2030 National Universal Health Coverage (UHC) Roadmap in 2021 during which the percentage of children 0-11 months vaccinated with three doses of DTP-containing Penta vaccine was 91 per cent against the year’s KRC target of 90 per cent. This was possible because of improved UNICEF and partner-supported capacity of Government to provide uninterrupted services in hard-to-reach areas as demonstrated by the fact that at least 80 per cent of children 0-11 months in 87.5 per cent of the districts (against CPC baseline of 71 per cent and the 2023 target of 100 per cent) in Sierra Leone were vaccinated with three doses of DTP-containing/Penta vaccine.[4]

With UNICEF-procured supplies, 37,781 children with severe acute malnutrition (SAM) were treated in the national Integrated Management of Acute Malnutrition (IMAM) programme with a cure rate of 98.1 per cent driven by supportive supervision, training, and pinpoint bottleneck analyses to guide actions, programme and treatment adjustments as necessary. The KRC target of having a budgeted plan to improve dietary diversity was met at the end of 2021. The country has in line with the KRC target a budgeted plan to eliminate water and fluids to support increase in exclusive breastfeeding.

The launch of a new National Health and Sanitation Strategy in 2021 opened additional space for strengthened implementation of the Sierra Leone Water and Sanitation policy revised in 2020 (KRC8). This facilitated UNICEF-supported work by GoSL to reduce the percentage of people practicing open defecation from 17.6 per cent in 2020[5] to 16.4 per cent in 2021.[6] This is against the KRC target of 10.4 per cent and CPC target of 11 per cent by 2023 indicating a need for acceleration of efforts in this area. In a demonstration of cross-sectoral collaboration in UNICEF-supported programming, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) initiatives contributed to improving the attendance and learning environment in 38 schools in 2021 while 7,000 girls across 75 schools received reusable sanitary pads and menstrual hygiene management (MHM) training.

Through a targeting mechanism that gives extra weight to households with young children, an estimated 190,094 children were reached in 2021 with cash transfers provided to their households through the existing social safety net programme or the COVID-19 Emergency Cash Transfer programme in Sierra Leone to mitigate the effects of vulnerabilities. This was a strong improvement from 2020 when only 29,000 households were served. To support a more sustainable child-centred social protection programme, UNICEF supported GoSL to prepare a draft of the country’s national social protection strategy in 2021. It will be finalized in 2022 for adoption and subsequent implementation.

Cross-cutting work (especially in the areas of emergency preparedness and response, social and behaviour change communication (SBCC), advocacy, adolescent/youth empowerment, and strengthening of gender responsive programming) was also an important driver of results in 2021. Gender transformative programming is discussed below in the section on “Lessons Learned and Innovations”.

On emergency preparedness and response, UNICEF is co-leading 4 (Food and Nutrition, WASH, Protection and Psycho-Social (PSS), Risk Communication and Education) out of the 14 sectoral pillars
under the NDMA pillar system led by relevant ministries, directorates, and agencies. UNICEF contributed to Ebola preparedness and response under the leadership of the MoHS especially in the areas of WASH, infection prevention and control (IPC), risk communication and social mobilization, nutrition, and child protection/psychosocial support (PSS) sectors. Furthermore, UNICEF supported the Government with safe water, learning materials and essential school supplies for 700 children, and psychosocial support (PSS) for 5,515 children in response to the fire disaster at Susan’s Bay slum community in Freetown, which affected 1,700 families. In response to a fuel-tanker explosion which killed 154 people and injured many more, UNICEF supported with PSS for 931 victims and community members, information sharing, call helplines, and standard operating procedures for burn victims.

In the area of Social Behaviour Change (SBC), UNICEF contributed to empowering communities to participate in the design and implementation of programming initiatives in health and other sectors with a child protection focus. Orientation, training, and deployment of more than 11,000 community mobilizers, religious leaders, community health workers and engagement with community radios across sixteen districts were used to engage communities for the adoption of positive and protective behaviours for children, with emphasis on polio, measles, COVID-19 and EVD prevention and vaccination, and child protection.

Adolescent empowerment and participation, especially of girls, remained at the heart of UNICEF-supported programming in Sierra Leone. Relevant key initiatives in 2021 included engagement for life skills development in safe spaces (KRC5, KRC6) which reached 12,000 adolescent girls. The end line survey conducted by the UNICEF-supported safe spaces initiative showed that 80 per cent of the 646 adolescent girls surveyed expressed an increased sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to negotiate delay of early marriage after attending training sessions. There is promise of amplification of such results with the strong GoSL buy-in for initiatives with several entry points such as the Generation Unlimited (GenU) aimed at getting every young person into school, learning, training, or employment by 2030 by creating a platform for public-private investment in bankable, investable, at-scale solutions with and for young people. The UPSHIFT programme, which links youth and adolescent development with social innovation and social entrepreneurship for skills acquisition, helped 260 marginalized slum-dwelling adolescent girls develop advocacy capacities and enhance skills as problem solvers and changemakers in their communities using human-centred design thinking and entrepreneurial strategies.

UNICEF staff are the organization’s most important asset and their welfare, psychological safety, and morale jointly constitute the fundamental pillar around which all initiatives and work to achieve results for children revolve. Thus, UNICEF continued to prioritize staff health, work-life balance, diversity and equity, and an environment devoid of sexual and other forms of exploitation, harassment, and abuse of authority in accordance with the WCAR duty of care agenda to drive strong staff morale and optimal delivery of results for children. The use of flexible work modalities and hours was effectively encouraged, and a staff counsellor was available to staff and their families for confidential consultation and support all year. Local suppliers and implementing partners (IPs) were supported with training to enable them to operate with the same principles.

Sound financial management and participatory management practices (including regular staff-management consultations) in accordance with UN and UNICEF rules promoted zero tolerance for fraud and misuse of resources to ensure that 100 per cent of UNICEF’s financial resources are devoted to results for children. Programme and financial assurance plans were developed and implemented to track delivery of results in relation to inputs (including financial inputs) and proactively identify and address challenges to ensure that programme delivery is as planned, and bottlenecks are addressed swiftly and effectively.

The office resource mobilization strategy was updated and engagement with private sector businesses
to drive results for children progressed with an office-wide learning journey to build capacity on Business for Results.


UNICEF continued to play an important role in the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) and in several technical working groups using the opportunity for advocacy and to maintain a strong visibility of child rights in the UN’s contribution to the achievement of the SDGs.

*Saving Lives in Sierra Leone*, a joint programme between the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Health Organization, UNICEF, and a consortium of NGOs, funded by the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), sustained its role as a shared value partnership. It continued to strengthen GoSL’s capacity to provide reproductive, maternal, neonatal and child health and nutrition services and to procure essential commodities for the Free Health Care initiative in addition to supporting COVID-19 emergency response.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Organization for Migration, and UNICEF worked under an UN-to-UN partnership to contribute towards results under KRC-7 on birth registration. UNICEF leveraged this shared-value partnership and an existing programme cooperation agreement (PCA) with the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone (IRC-SL) on social mobilization to develop birth and death registration messages and integrate them into a manual for use by religious leaders to improve knowledge and awareness on the right and access to birth registration in their congregations.

A joint programme partnership between UNDP, UNFPA, and UNICEF funded by the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNPRPD) started in the fourth quarter of 2021 wherein UNICEF and partners will undertake a baseline study of the situation of people with disabilities. Each agency will tap into its comparative advantage to drive a more robust analysis that can be followed up collectively and individually by the agencies. UNICEF will lead the technical support to Government to develop and pilot a new system for assessment and registration of disability.

UNICEF’s mandate and capacity to convene important stakeholders across multiple sectors has been crucial to harnessing the commitment of other sectors towards creating an enabling environment that fosters results for children. In the area of adolescent and youth engagement and empowerment, UNICEF supported the creation of national coordination bodies to drive programmes such as GenU, already discussed in the immediately preceding section of this report. Such platforms which are made up of private sector leaders and representatives from Government, CSOs, youth groups, and the UN, provide opportunities to accelerate results for children, especially through innovation.

UNICEF led the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines and syringes through the COVAX and African Vaccine Acquisition Trust facilities, and facilitated collaborative financial agreements between GoSL, World Bank, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, Islamic Development Bank, and the Global Fund to sustain essential health services. UNICEF Sierra Leone used regular and social media channels to ensure appropriate donor recognition and visibility for contributions, and leveraged support from UNICEF Supply Division in Copenhagen to achieve a throughput of $7.7 million in the procurement of medical and programmatic supplies at all levels.

### Lessons Learned and Innovations

Considering the strategies deployed to drive programme implementation and achieve results in 2021, several lessons were learned.

- UNICEF adopted a different approach to training partners in 2021. With the increase of online trainings, UNICEF deployed its quality assurance team to conduct a cascade of trainings in the
most hard-to-reach districts of the country over the course of three weeks. Thus, instead of the pre-COVID-19 approach under which only one or two focal persons from IPs attended training events, entire teams were able to receive pertinent information on ethics, risk, fraud, and financial SOPs and directly ask questions. Importantly, the quality assurance team was able to give on-the-ground guidance to IPs on how to improve their systems to strengthen risk management. This new approach facilitated a compilation of recommendations and best practices that have been shared with partners for guidance and reference purposes.

- A UNICEF-supported bottleneck analysis of health and nutrition services and practices was undertaken within the framework of Appreciative Inquiry and a Caring for the Caregiver (CFC) pilot implemented in 2021. This revealed that in addition to the well-known physical, social, and financial access barriers, there are psychological barriers associated with patriarchal and other power structures which drive perpetuation and reinforcement of gender norms that discriminate against women and girls. This calls for gender transformative programming directed at root causes, including proactive mental health support for marginalized people, and use of innovative approaches, technology-based solutions to break through psychological and social barriers and norms.

- A summative evaluation conducted on the WASH initiative ‘Accelerating Sanitation and Water for All Programme, Sierra Leone (ASWA-SL)’ with support of UNICEF Regional Office for West and Central Africa, captured lessons to inform future WASH programmes.

  - It was noted that there is a need for better understanding of behaviour change dynamics and barriers faced by the most vulnerable population, particularly persons with disabilities, in accessing WASH services. Secondly there is a need to work with them and their communities to find constructive ways to eliminate these barriers.

  - Another important lesson learned was that achieving sustainable benefits in health and living standards requires combining programming on access to safe water with sanitation, hygiene practices, and behavioural change in line with SDG6. The evaluation report recommended focusing on communities in a more comprehensive synergistic approach ensuring that a target community receives all three WASH components (water, sanitation, and hygiene) rather than attempting to reach a maximum number of communities with only partial services.

- UNICEF underwent an internal audit of its CPC with GoSL during the reporting year. Based on the findings, recommendations were agreed for follow up by the office. In 2022, the office will continue to follow up on the recommendations to streamline various processes including for selection of IPs and the use of UNICEF’s tools for tracking quality assurance activities, which are essential in ensuring effective and robust programming.

Innovations

- Given the restrictions that were in place on travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF experimented with its donor visit modality from in-person visits to virtual tours. This was done through a combination of videos of a project and discussions with the end recipients and with UNICEF staff. This, for instance, provided an opportunity for the Swedish National Committee for UNICEF to view work and challenges in Sierra Leone. This modality has been found to be cost-effective, participatory and will be increasingly offered as an option for future donor visits.

- As a response to the global learning crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the widening learning gap, UNICEF has scaled up the face to face UPSHIFT model through digitization of the UPSHIFT curriculum. The digitized approach facilitates scaling up informal
learning opportunities for adolescents in Sierra Leone thereby contributing to the GoSL’s strategic priority on building human capacity at all levels.

Leveraging Resources and Looking Forward

• UNICEF Sierra Leone is increasingly leveraging investments under specific initiatives to achieve results in one or more other areas with funding challenges or to take programming and results to scale. To this end, this report has already shown how the network of health workers across Sierra Leone is being leveraged to expand birth registration. In some cases, such leveraging is only just being tapped into. This is the case with the Reimagine Education initiative to address the learning crisis demonstrated by the fact that millions of children and young people are not developing the skills they need to break out of poverty. The initiative is reimagining education as an enterprise to build not just reading, writing, and mathematics skills but also skills in problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking that young people need for work, to start a business, and to engage productively in their communities. Another opportunity is provided through the GIGA programme aimed at connecting every school to the internet and thus expanding options for reimagining education in Sierra Leone.

• Thirty-five UNICEF staff were trained on Business for Results and the office engaged business leaders who responded positively to UNICEF’s initiative to create a business forum on child rights in Sierra Leone. This is a huge opportunity for greater sustainable progress on child rights, not only through direct private sector and business support for UNICEF’s work but also indirectly with businesses and private sector operators embedding child rights standards and considerations into their work.

The above lessons learned and their implications for programme strategy adjustments, along with emerging opportunities especially regarding leveraging and use of innovations as discussed above, will boost results starting in 2022 when they will be integrated into the new biennial GoSL-UNICEF Rolling Workplans for 2022-2023. The CPC’s approach to WASH, for example, based on lessons learned from the WASH evaluation discussed above, will transition to a strategy under which communities receive all three WASH components (water, sanitation, and hygiene) as opposed to single interventions to drive more sustainable results in WASH. GoSL’s mid-term review of its MTNDP and the UNICEF-supported Strategic Moment of Reflection scheduled for 2022 will contribute additional lessons that will help shape the next CPC (2024–2028).