Update on the context and situation of children

The COVID-19 pandemic in Africa’s worst affected country provided no respite, continuing to devastate lives, livelihoods and childhood. More than 90,000[1] people have died and in-turn nearly 95,000[2] children have lost parents and guardians since the outbreak, the highest number of COVID orphans on the continent. The third wave of the virus that hit in mid-2021 was the worst yet and was exacerbated by widespread looting and violence across Kwa Zulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces in July. The unrest escalated quickly following the jailing of former President, Jacob Zuma, resulting in at least 342 people[3] being killed, and more than 140 schools[4] looted, with billions of Rands recorded in damages. This also had an immediate and long-term psychological impact on children who were exposed to the violence. Xenophobic violence and politically motivated attacks that also continued and spiked at times, particularly the targeted harassment and violence against ‘illegal’ migrants and refugees.

The pandemic’s impact hit when economic vulnerabilities had already been aggravated by a prolonged period of depressed investment, subdued growth, and high and rising public debt[5]. Already high poverty rates, unemployment, and inequality worsened further—the education system suffered, and job losses disproportionally affected the youth, women, and the poor[6]. The percentage of youth aged 15-34-years not in employment, education or training (NEET) reached 64.4%[7] in the second quarter of the year, the highest figure in the world.

The Sisonke COVID-19 vaccination trial meant that most healthcare workers were protected just ahead of the 3rd wave, but the wider roll-out was slow to get going, initially due to supply challenges and more recently a result of access issues, vaccine-hesitancy and mis-disinformation. South Africa has fully[8] vaccinated 38% of its eligible population, close to the 40% WHO-AFRO target but well below the initial 70% national target set. ‘Vooma Vaccination Drives’[9] and the discovery of the Omicron variant boosted the roll-out, as people sought protection. On 20 October, the Government announced that 12–17-year-olds were eligible for their first COVID-19 shots[10].

Uneven routine childhood immunization coverage remains a concern, with the percentage of one-year-olds who received three doses of the combined diphtheria, tetanus toxoid and pertussis vaccine dropping from 85% in 2020 to 78% in 2021. The impact on treatment for HIV/AIDS, in particular pediatric and mother-to-child prevention, is equally concerning. Children are consistently left behind in the HIV response, with only 75% of children 0-14 years aware of their HIV status and of those that know, 53% are on ARV treatment and only 37% are virally suppressed; compared to 92% of adults knowing their status, 66% on treatment and 61% virally suppressed[11]. The nutritional status of children also showed no sign of improvement with one in three under-five-year-olds still stunted, while obesity rates continue to rise. In the first quarter of the year there were one million fewer visits to primary healthcare facilities compared to the same time pre-COVID[12].

The impact of COVID-19 on the early development of nearly 8-million children from birth to 6-years is more silent.[13] The latest statistics show that almost 25% of children from birth to 4-years were attending a programme in an ECD centre,[14] with UNICEF reaching some 700,000 children with ECD support and building the capacity of more than 60,000 ECD professionals[15].

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) played a lead role in working to keep schools open safely but in-person schooling was combined with remote education. In July 2021, ahead of the second school term, the NIDS-CRAM survey and DBE statistics released showed that learners were 75% to a full school year behind where they should be, due to rotational attendance, sporadic school closures.
and days off[16]. The findings helped to sway Teachers Unions and public attitudes towards the need for children to receive in-person schooling as much as possible.

The physical and mental wellbeing of children and young people has been impacted, as increased stress at the household and community-level often spills over into violence and abuse against children. Prior to the pandemic, one in three girls already experienced some form of violence, often from someone they know.[17] Gender-based violence has been described as the second pandemic and from April to June 2021 where more than 10,000 rapes were recorded[18]. Teenage pregnancies also increased, with figures from the Gauteng Department of Health showing more than 23,000 teenage pregnancies from March 2020 to April 2021, a 60% increase on the previous year[19].

Some 65% of young people who reported mental health issues did not seek help,[20] and 70% of children surveyed reported using the Internet without parental consent, and 67% of child participants reported that they were exposed to sexual images on an online device.[21] Moreover, adolescents living with HIV with symptoms of mental disorders have a high prevalence of virological non-suppression, especially if they do not know their status or have not disclosed it[22].

[4] DBE statistics
[5] International Monetary Fund, ‘Concluding Statement of the 2021 Article IV Mission’
[8] Department of Health statistics
[9] The Presidency – President welcomes Vooma Vaccination Weekend turnout
[10] Department of Health, Vaccinations for 12-years +
[11] Thembisa 4.4, Centre for Infectious Diseases Epidemiology and Research (CIDER)
[12] UNICEF Situation Report Number 16
[16] UNICEF Press Release, based on NIDS CRAM / DBE data
[18] SA Police Statistics
[19] Gauteng Department of Health statistics

**Major contributions and drivers of results**

*Every child survives and thrives / Every child lives in a safe and clean environment*

UNICEF and partners supported the development and finalization of the South African Maternal, Perinatal and Neonatal Health Policy in 2021. UNICEF provided technical assistance to government in the coordination, planning and implementation of the multi-sectoral interventions prioritized in the National Food and Nutrition Security Implementation Plan (2018-2023), through the development of
the communication strategy. The plan addresses all forms of malnutrition, including the high stunting rates of 27%, by addressing the fragmented approaches in South Africa.

UNICEF continues to support the government-led ‘Side-by-Side’ campaign through SABC radio to empower and support parents and caregivers with relevant information and services during their child-rearing journey. Weekly radio dramas were broadcasted in nine official languages through 11 SABC radio stations, reaching more than 4.3 million people a week with messages related to the five pillars of the ‘Road to Health Booklet’.

UNICEF conducted a baseline study on modifiable risk factors for NCDs focusing on diet and physical activity. This study included, amongst others: policy scoping; analysis of available evidence on NCD prevention initiatives led by youths; analysis of epidemiological data and available information to identify high risk, underserved, or vulnerable adolescent sub-groups to NCD risk factors.

UNICEF supported five provinces on cold chain and logistics by embedding five consultants in the provincial departments of health. The support included capacity building in effective vaccine management, auditing of cold chain and strengthening the cold chain management of childhood and COVID-19 vaccines.

Through the WASH programme, 280 handwashing stations and 10,000 WASH kits were provided to school, health care facilities, ECDs, and to vulnerable communities, reaching an estimated 193,000 individuals. Handwashing stations also provided an entry point to RCCE programmes at these sites.

Every child learns
UNICEF’s learning through play in the foundation phase continued to yield positive results with 85,919 new enrollments and 33,307 completions in 2021. Another 4,206 Grade R to 3 educators were trained on play-based manipulatives in the classroom using the six-bricks model.

Countering systemic inequities for girls’ access to STEM subjects and career opportunities, while preparing young people for the opportunities and challenges for the 21st century, resulted in 400,000 additional learners accessing open online textbooks; 200,000 learners using adaptive Math practice software; and 10,000,000 additional Math practice questions completed online, while coding and robotics were piloted in 100 schools in Limpopo and North West. To improve outcomes in mathematics and science, 757,230 learners used online textbooks for mathematics, while teachers accessed high quality online learning and teaching materials aligned with the CAPS for Mathematics to improve learning outcomes.

The protocol to eliminate unfair discrimination in schools is being finalized and the revision of the Framework for Curriculum Implementation positively impacted reading proficiency, while 690 teachers were trained in 140 schools on the Early Grade Reading Programme in North West province.

Technical assistance in the strengthening of the basic education system included support on the function shift of ECD from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education; intergovernmental and inter-sectoral cooperation in school services to ensure cross collaboration, disability inclusion and fast tracking of the provision of services; and the review of the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning Framework to ensure caring and supportive environments for continuation of learning in school.

The emergency response to maintain early learning and basic education reached 4,961,506 children through various platforms and interventions.

Every child is protected from violence and exploitation
UNICEF played a pivotal role in increasing awareness and action for children, including migrant
populations, the child rights governance agenda, the right to be safe, online and offline, as well as mental health and psychosocial support. Through advocacy, media, Childline, Scalabrini and Govchat platform, over 5 million people were reached with information on counselling and referral in regard to child protection and GBV, provided with information on issues related to migration, mental health, online protection and child rights governance.

Some 8,779 families participated in parenting programmes with the Department of Social Development (DSD) and Sonke Mencare Justice, promoting the role of men as fathers. Intensified support to the Risiha programme scaled up prevention and early intervention services in partnership with DSD, corporates, civil society, the UNICEF US Fund and German NatCom. The capacity of social service professionals was strengthened, including 284 social service professionals and 202 educators on online protection; 9,912 on mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS), gender-based violence (GBV) and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA); and 147 health workers on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Data on children’s well-being was collected in real-time from six out of nine provinces and in response to the July unrest in Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal provinces using the real-time monitoring tool developed with UNICEF assistance. These efforts resulted in improved care and protection for children affected; and improved data collection on children living with disabilities. A digitized case management system for ‘children on the move’ was also developed for all provinces.

In response to the July unrest, peacebuilding and community dialogues were initiated, small business holders supported, and direct relief provided to over 114,000 families. A ‘Violence Against Children’ (VAC) survey was conducted, as well as a landscape analysis on social service professionals. UNICEF provided technical inputs to the State of the Fatherhood Report that promotes gender-responsive parenting, highlights men’s caregiving role and promotes fatherhood for better care and protection of children.

Every child has an equitable chance in life
UNICEF supported the finalization of a draft commitment document on child rights governance, enhanced the public finance and child poverty evidence base, focused on the equity status of children in social programming, increased awareness of the role of multidimensional poverty approaches in understanding child poverty and advocated for greater resources for children and increased commitment by the government to create space to listen to citizens and social partners.

A key achievement was the re-establishment of a UNICEF-National Treasury relationship. Given the sustained reduction of government expenditure, it has become more vital to advocate for child friendly budgeting, and the National Treasury has a central role in budget management and resources allocations. This dialogue was supported by the production of new equity data for children and the active use of newly created multidimensional poverty tools. Having monetised the socially perceived necessities index, it is now possible to establish the extent to which households that have children fall below or above the Decent Standard of Living measures.

In 2021, advocacy work included a media article on the government’s budget and its provisions for children; extensive use of social media to promote multidimensional poverty; and numerous articles by partners, highlighting the gaps in social protection for children. In addition, a public webinar on public finance and children’s socio-economic rights was co-hosted by UNICEF and the Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII), screened on YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms on the impact of fiscal austerity on children’s equitable chances in life.

UNICEF participated in the UN Sustainable Development Goal Fund for Social Protection, supporting the appointment of an elite academic panel to advise the Minister of Social Development on the feasibility or not of introducing a Basic Income Grant (BIG). The first report highlighted the potential
of the exclusion study in assisting government to facilitate further poverty reduction and tackling vulnerability whilst promoting developmental outcomes in households with children.

**Cross-Cutting Work Areas and Key Enablers**

**Generation Unlimited**

Foundational work for contextualizing the global Generation Unlimited initiative in South Africa was on-going, with the finalization and dissemination to key partners of a landscape analysis, country investment agenda and roadmap. A governance structure is in place and will be ratified by partners in 2022.

In parallel, the young people agenda under GenU continued to advance. The Siyavula Foundation offered secondary education support through zero-rated platforms in Mathematics and Science, reaching more than 400,000 students. The University of Pretoria’s Junior Tukkie Programme provided digital learning platforms in Mathematics, English, Science and Accounting to more than 500,000 students. Through a partnership with Afrika Tikkun, 620 (440 female), 50% of whom were young people ‘Not in Employment, Education or Training’ (NEET) participated in and completed a basic computer literacy course; and 400 completed virtual job shadowing for a total of 840 (60% female). UNICEF also partnered with the University of Pretoria Future Africa and trained 6,286 young people on skills to respond to COVID-19, with a focus on youth under a seven faculty multi-disciplinary programme.

Job shadowing benefitted more than 2,335 girls and boys through partnership with Africa Tikkun and Girls Fly Africa Programme. Coding and robotics, online learning under Reimagine Education and basic computing, labour laws, drone technology and aviation science also benefitted more than 500,000 young people in and out of school (NEETs).

**Communication /RCCE**

UNICEF South Africa’s ability to reach, engage and influence targeted audiences on priority child rights issues and COVID-19 prevention was significantly enhanced in 2021. This was achieved through powerful, pre-tested and evidence-based digital content, more deliberate and scaled-up media work, as well as direct community and youth engagement.

UNICEF’s central role within the Department of Health RCCE COVID-19 response enabled UNICEF to influence and effectively respond to priority needs through active engagement in the various workstreams of the RCCE Technical Working Group. ‘The Truck’ multimedia activation crossed the country playing stories from the community back to the community to influence behavior. As the year progressed, ‘The Truck’ evolved from a multimedia messenger to a direct health service provider alongside DoH mobile COVID vaccination outreach and broader child and health services, targeting populations with limited access to fixed health services.

Through U-Report and the Internet of Good Things, surveys were conducted to generate insights into attitudes and responses of specific target groups to the Covid 19 vaccine and provide a concrete contribution to evidence informing programming. Health workers were a priority group in the country’s vaccine rollout program, and a survey aimed at this sector was conducted prior to rollout of the vaccine program. Findings from this enabled adapting and packaging of targeted communication on facts about the vaccine, its safety, efficacy, and rolling out of targeted campaigns – and guided advocacy efforts by the NDoH. Youth had also shown evidence of hesitancy from surveys conducted earlier, and when they became eligible, a poll targeting this age group indicated above 50% openness to the vaccine.

Social media and website engagement increased significantly, as people sought COVID advice and guidance, but also as divisive vaccine narratives played out. At the same time, UNICEF Volunteers played a vital role on the ground supporting and encouraging elders to get vaccinated, with their work recognized at the highest level by the President. All the above contributed to a more integrated approach to the COVID-19 response and in tackling broader child rights issues.
Data and Evidence
A concept note for a child rights monitoring and follow up framework was developed in preparation for the child rights conference. A steering committee comprised of DSD/ORC, UNICEF, the national coalition on child rights, the human rights commission, academia and other civil society groups was constituted and met twice to adopt the agenda and concept note. This is a key step in pulling together agreed child rights indicators into a consolidated dashboard for the country to be house in the Office of the Rights of the Child, which is moving to the Presidency. This work will continue into 2022 and aims to be an important monitoring and advocacy tool.

Partner results and monitoring frameworks were strengthened through a systematized quality assurance process. Support to the development of a framework for assessing the M&E capacity of implementing partners including analysis of the current situation and identifying gaps and mitigation measures was initiated and will continue into 2022.

UNICEF supported the development of the National Youth Policy M&E framework including participation in the validation workshop and proposing the development of an automated reporting platform. This support was officially accepted by the Department of Women, Youth and People with Disabilities (DWYPD) and the inception phase of the project will begin in 2022.

Conversations with stakeholders, including the SDG Hub, YOMA, Water Research Commission (WRC) focused on youth to support SDG monitoring in the WASH sector. This resulted in funding from the Botnar Foundation under the YOMA umbrella to pilot a project on citizen science data collection with a learning to earning pathway for youth. UNICEF will partner with the WRC in 2022 to undertake research, knowledge exchange and foment a community of practice together with other stakeholders in this area of work.

The team undertook an end user monitoring assessment of the handwashing stations that were built as part of the COVID-19 response, with the findings informing further programme action. A COVID-19 response dashboard was updated three times in 2021 and helped to inform internal cross sectoral coordination.

Innovation
UNICEF SACO supported various pilots and tested innovative approaches and tools. This allowed the more comprehensive cross-sectoral deployment of innovative products and services for children and youth. Examples of scalable innovations included the roll-out of a local blockchain technology called “Zlto” which reached 100,000 young people, implemented in partnership with UNDP, allowing young people to access credentials, work experience and digital rewards as well as food and non-food items. In addition, remote service delivery was accelerated through virtual counselling and peer support for adolescent girls and mothers; the accelerated roll-out of e-learning apps; technology-focused winter school; virtual challenges to promote RCCE and WASH; virtual GenU Youth Challenges and regional collaborations around additional online challenges for youth, and more.

Operations – Efficiency and Effectiveness Agenda
This year focused on mainstreaming the efficiency and effectiveness agenda to deliver results for children, including discussions and focused meetings to identify and address barriers and bottlenecks which affected efficiencies. For example, the Low Value SOP which had limits conflicting those at the corporate level and the provision of training on Vision to assist in smooth programme implementation.

Multiple SoPs and guidelines were developed, and trainings held to orient staff on work processes (HACT, donor reporting, evaluations). Some SOPs were created to ensure clarity in roles and responsibilities which have allowed for a more efficient way of working and others had not been revised to align with revised UNICEF policies and so were required change. A knowledge
management platform (ECM) project was initiated resulting in the SACO page being populated and linked to global navigation and collaboration sites for teams developed to adopt a more organized digital workplace.

Operations supported the finalization of more contracts and partnerships than in 2020 due to the expanded COVID response - 25 individual contracts (21 in 2020), and 44 partnership agreements (28 in 2020). The E-tools system is fully rolled out and the minimum requirements for programmatic visits, spot checks and audits were met. Staff well-being and professional growth was supported with workshops on psychological safety and unconscious bias held.
UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF provided leadership to operationalize the United Nations Sustainable Development Framework (UNSDCF) as co-lead for the Human Capital and Social Transformation - Results Group (RG) 2, as well as the Youth Theme group. In addition, SACO participates in RG 1 – Inclusive, just and sustainable economic growth, RG3 - Effective, efficient and transformative governance, and RG4 - Climate resilience and sustainably managed natural resources. UNICEF is a key player in the one UN SDG Fund for Social Protection Joint Programme and with the ILO, acts as one of the two technical focal points.

UNICEF participates as a member in the UNCT, UN theme groups (Gender and Social Protection), M&E, communications group, as well as the operations group. UNICEF – Government rolling work plans aligned to the UNSDCF were signed at the end of November. UNICEF played a lead role in the UN Communication Group as the co-chair helping to shape and inform joint communications work. UNICEF participates in the UN joint team on HIV and AIDS as technical leads on PMTCT and pediatric HIV working group. Additional resources have been mobilized for 2022/23 from the Business Unusual Fund to extend research in identifying the best model to scale up PrEP in antenatal care settings in one additional district.

UNICEF contributed towards the post-July civil unrest UN assessments led by the RC’s office directly engaging with media on behalf of the UN and supported fundraising for the response plan. UNICEF also engaged in the District Development Model, through three signature projects: Business Solution, Thuthuzela and Thusong Centres in OR Tambo, Waterberg and Ethekwini districts.

UNICEF has reconnected with the National Treasury as an important social partner and key stakeholder in the social policy arena, while ensuring that the partnership with National Treasury is inclusive and all social partners, including our civil society partners, derive the benefits of structured engagements with the National Treasury. As the Secretariat for Generation Unlimited, working with the UN Youth Group, UNICEF contributed to expanding partnerships with key Government entities, including the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative. Partnership with the SA Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) contributed towards building national evaluation capacity through a Hackathon that produced knowledge products and the launch of an emerging evaluators programme together with CLEAR-AA, and WFP.

Through the CEO Network, corporate partners engaged and mobilized on local initiatives. Momentum entered into the first ever multi-year partnership agreement rallying behind Child Protection and the Safe Parks initiative. Woolworths and Unilever also made generous contributions enabling 70 handwashing stations to be built in schools, improving handwashing access for 32,000 learners and educational staff. A few sizeable commitments also originated via NatComs, such as Johnson and Johnson and MAC Cosmetics.

In 2021, SACO raised just over $13 million of which roughly $4 million was for emergency response and $1 million from private sector partnerships in-country. This exceeds the country programme annual target of $8.29 million and falls about $1 million short of the emergency fundraising plan of $5.2 million.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

With the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting unpredictability of the programming environment the key theme of adaptability, agility and flexibility remained relevant throughout the year. For example, the critical Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) response to COVID required an agile approach, with an ability to shift focus as the virus and
vaccine roll-out evolved. When the COVID-19 vaccines opened earlier than expected for the 18- to 34-year-old age group, UNICEF quickly activated a U-Report poll to better understand youth perceptions of the vaccine, information that was fed back into the RCCE technical working group.

The broader UNICEF RCCE strategy was tweaked in mid-2021 to focus specifically on youth, a group who were being missed and not actively engaged in the COVID response. U-Report proved to be a particularly effective tool in gaining rapid access to youth opinions and views, informing communication and programmatic work. The findings worked particularly well in UNICEF media work and played a key role in the scaled-up media engagement work throughout the year. The exponential rise in social media engagement was partly a result of in-kind Facebook ad credits, as well as the active and often divisive nature of comments related to COVID vaccines.

UNICEF Volunteers also came into their own during the COVID response in 2021, playing a direct on the ground role in encouraging elders and their peers to get vaccinated, a new partnership with Oak Foundation and Heartlines will further scale up this work in early 2022.

The ability to **nurture and foster adaptive approaches** – i.e., innovation - in line with the realities of the emergency is essential for successful programming in uncertain times. For as long as uncertainties such as brought by the lockdown regulations remain in place limiting face-to-face interactions, online training takes place. Whilst this has been mostly successful in more urban provinces with appropriate infrastructure and network connectivity to allow for these online sessions, there is a need to strengthen the digital structure to ensure that all provinces in the country can also benefit from such sessions. Unequal access to the Internet risks exacerbating existing inequalities in education and training, and this is in area that UNICEF can encourage the government to focus more on and strengthen, and this has in some ways started. Quick review of the UNICEF global Learning Passport resulted in a decision to use homegrown solutions while leaving room for partnership at the appropriate moment with the Learning Passport. A key take-away on this was the cost-effectiveness and ease or rapidity of deployment – besides immediate relevance – of these local, home-grown solutions. Parallel to this learning was the obvious realization of the empowerment aspect of such engagement with UNICEF among the local partnerships. It raised their profile more than hitherto, and a wider section of society got to be aware of their existence, and impact. Lessons learnt in 2020 enabled the sector to improve 2021 response and improve design and implementation.

The value of **strategic positioning and partnerships** came to the fore in 2021 with efforts on-going to push forward the Generation Unlimited (GenU) agenda in South Africa. A key lesson learned from the foundational work done on GenU is to ensure that a global initiative is contextualized in-country and a clear value proposition established. For example, in South Africa there is a Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI) that mirrors the goals of GenU. In 2022, UNICEF will work closely with GIZ, ILO, UNDP, the World Bank and the EU to position GenU into the local context.

In Social Policy, the main lesson learned in 2021 was to **focus on simplifying the overall work agenda** for the year - primary research is time-intensive and challenging and leads to defined opportunity costs; and, finding a better balance between research and advocacy and treating the demands of advocacy in the same way you would with reference to primary research and analysis. Responding to the constraints, the programme invested heavily in evidence generation based on the assumption that the primary research is unlikely to date and could be used in advocacy work in 2022 and beyond. This research also served to strategically remind the government of the excellent work it has done and not to destroy its overall commitment to children’s programmes during this period of fiscal consolidation. Collaborative work with other programmes in UNICEF will become necessary to capitalise on programme’s extensive networks and to restore the integrity and cohesiveness of children’s programming.