Update on the context and situation of children

2021, which marked the first year of implementation of both the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and the UNICEF country programme, proved to be challenging for Timor-Leste in addition to the regular programming, the country office had to respond to two simultaneous emergencies, massive floods, worst in the recent history of the country, and the COVID-19 outbreak which rapidly worsened in 2021. In early 2021, the Government of Timor-Leste Government decided to again postpone its graduation from Least Developed Country status (LDC) for another three years. After the sharp GDP contraction of 2020, the expected economic recovery was limited, and the initial 3.1 per cent GDP growth forecast for 2021 was re-estimated by the World Bank to 1.9 per cent, linked to the twin humanitarian crises that the country faced: major floods and multiple waves of COVID-19 cases. Heavy rains across the country in late March/early April resulted in flash floods and landslides affecting all 13 municipalities in Timor-Leste to varying degrees, with the capital Dili and the surrounding low-lying areas being worst affected. Flooding and landslides caused 42 fatalities and affected 31,029 households across Timor-Leste. Of those, 82 per cent - or 25,350 households - were in Dili municipality. 13,554 people were internally displaced in Dili, and 43 evacuation facilities were set up across the municipality. While the number of evacuation centres gradually reduced as people returned home, some remained open for over six months, due to difficulties in relocating some of the population. This natural disaster took place in the context of rising COVID-19 cases. After 2020, when Timor-Leste had only a few cases, the situation changed in early 2021, with infections first in the western municipalities bordering with Indonesia, and later reaching Dili and the rest of the country. By the end of the year, Timor-Leste totaled 19,833 cases, with 122 deaths, which are significant given the small size of the country. The Government imposed a series of restrictions to contain the pandemic, including school closures in several municipalities, and a strict lockdown in Dili starting in March 2021. COVID-19 cases continued to increase to reach a peak in late May. A second wave, fueled by the Delta variant, hit the country in August. Restrictions tended to ease from September, and schools started to reopen. However, for most of the year, the country remained isolated, with infrequent flights in and out and restrictions on entry, which also created logistical challenges, as well as increased costs, for UNICEF and others to bring supplies into the country. The Government and its partners focused much of their attention on humanitarian action, in particular on providing relief to the families in floods evacuation centres and affected communities in Dili municipality, controlling two successive waves of COVID-19, providing emergency food supplies to the population, and COVID-19 vaccination, first for adults from April 2021, and then for children 12 to under 18 years from late October. As of 30 December, 68.1 per cent of adults had received two doses, and 15.7 per cent of those aged 12 to 17. The combined crises negatively impacted children and their families, both economically and regarding access to basic services. As per the Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 (SEIA-2), a nationally representative survey carried out by the UN and the National Statistical Office, 58.5 per cent of households were forced to use at least one form of livelihood coping strategies (for instance selling livestock or reducing education and health costs). The poorest households, especially those in the remote parts of the country and with high levels of social vulnerability, were hit the hardest. COVID-19 resulted in missed vaccination for a sizable share of children (37 per cent of households reported one or more children under 10 missing scheduled vaccination) and missed reproductive health services for over half of women. Reasons for not accessing health services when needed included fear of getting infected with COVID-19, travel ban/movement restrictions, and fear of getting tested (and then placed in an isolation facility). The impact on continuity of education was also impacted, with over a third of students (ages four to 25) who stopped studying or studied irregularly, mainly due to the scarcity of printed learning materials (52.1 per cent) but also from a lack of desire to study (17.8...
In addition, SEIA-2 pointed to more than a doubling of cases of violence against children (physical and sexual abuse), based on administrative data from the relevant ministry and on key informant interviews with service providers. The SEIA-2 data was all the more precious as the Population and Housing Census, initially expected in 2020, was again postponed due to the crisis, which in turn further pushed back another two national surveys, the Demographic and Health Survey and the Standards of Living Survey, to 2023. This in turn hampers the ability of the Government and its partners to identify trends and adjust their priorities and policies. Amidst growing concerns over fiscal sustainability and with withdrawals from the Petroleum Fund consistently exceeding the Estimated Sustainable Income, the Government had proposed to the Parliament a reduced, US$1.675 billion State budget for 2022, with cuts in health, education and social protection. However, Parliamentarians subsequently proposed over 140 amendments, and in late December voted to increase the budget to US$1.95 billion.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Child survival and development

During 2021, UNICEF support was centered on the COVID-19 response. Main activities included the introduction and roll-out of COVID-19 vaccine, the response to floods as well as accelerating the improvement in access and utilization of health, nutrition and WASH services.

With regards to the response to COVID-19, UNICEF contributed to 6 pillars of the response, had co-leadership role in a number of sub-committees of the National Deployment and Vaccination Plan (NDVP) and supported the national response through financial, technical and logistical resources. By 30 December, the overall vaccination coverage, among the population 12 years and above, was 71 per cent and 57.9 per cent for the 1st and 2nd dose respectively. The vaccination in the cohort of 12 - <18 years started late in the year and has only covered adolescent children in Dili, the capital. 19.5 per cent and 15.7 per cent of the adolescent children 12 - <18 years received the 1st and 2nd dose respectively.

A key significant contribution in 2021 was the development of the national behaviour change strategy for vaccine uptake and development of print and multi-media material that surveys show helped raise awareness on the COVID-19 vaccines. UNICEF also used video messages on social media or television, as well as community radio stations, to increase awareness on COVID-19 prevention and vaccine uptake, and education and nutrition. Additionally, 400 people with visual impairment were provided information in braille, and key videos included sign language to ensure people with disabilities had access to accurate COVID-19 prevention information.

UNICEF, in collaboration with line Ministries and other partners, supported the response to the April floods with the following results:

- 80,000 displaced individuals received masks, hand sanitizers & information, education and communication (IEC) materials for COVID-19 prevention and control;

- 4,342 consultations were conducted for acute respiratory infection (ARI), skin diseases, acute gastritis, diarrheal diseases and hypertension;

- 501 women of reproductive age, pregnant mothers and breastfeeding women, received support through Mobile Maternity Clinics;
- 484 children were screened for malnutrition and treatment provided when needed;
- 67 pregnant women were screened for malnutrition and treatment provided when needed;
- 668 mothers received counseling and information promoting optimal infant and young child feeding (IYCF);
- 44 million liters of clean water were provided to flood victims in evacuation facilities & affected communities;
- 170 units of temporary toilets were installed in 10 evacuation centers benefiting 4,000 people, 200 temporary handwashing stations were distributed, reaching 4,000 affected people;
- 200,000 Aquatab tablets were distributed for water purification.

In addition to the COVID-19 response and vaccine roll-out, UNICEF support for health interventions yielded tangible results. By 30 September, 83 per cent of children had received the 1st dose of Measles-Rubella vaccine and 83.2 per cent of deliveries were attended by a skilled health personnel, increasing from 76 per cent in 2020 in the same period and are higher than the annual target of 80 per cent. To enhance the adequate management of acute malnutrition, UNICEF supported the introduction and scale up of the simplified approach for the management of acute malnutrition nationwide (all 13 Municipalities). The cure rate for the children admitted for severe acute malnutrition (SAM) rose to 85 per cent.

UNICEF also supported a number of Health, Nutrition and WASH advocacy events which are key to creating an enabling environment and leveraging partnership and resources to improve programmes. Through UNICEF support, Timor-Leste participated in the 2021 Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit in Tokyo. Advocacy was made to key influencers like the Nobel Peace Prize holder, Jose Ramos Horta, to support the fight against child malnutrition.

2021 was a unique year for Timor-Leste’s WASH Sector due to several dynamics. The prime focus was to bounce back to the development agenda diverted by COVID-19 in 2020. Similarly, the environment health department of the Ministry of Health was able to recommence the Sanitation Working Group platform after two years of break. This was essential in the context of Timor-Leste’s national Open Defecation Free (ODF) targets being reviewed, while setting 2024 as the year to reach basic sanitation. The latest data in 2021 has estimated households with access to at least basic level water and sanitation at 85 per cent and 57 per cent respectively. It further reported a drop in Open Defecation from 20 per cent in 2019 to 18 per cent. In addition, over 100 toilets, 73 handwashing facilities and 90 bathrooms were renovated, almost two kilometers of water distribution pipelines were laid, and pumps and water tanks installed, and a number of new facilities constructed to support border crossings.

**Learning**

In the first half of 2021, the education programme focused on the response to COVID-19 and the floods. UNICEF supported continued learning through the provision of learning materials and the first distance learning programme in the country, the “Eskola ba Uma” app, and the Timor-Leste Learning Passport Platform. Training on distance learning was provided to 1,024 schools’ leaders and teachers in all municipalities. The online learning platforms have 25,581 followers on Facebook, 133,533 views on YouTube with 2,923 subscribers and a total of 24,992 users of the Learning Passport platform. In addition, 17,937 teachers have registered on the app.
Regarding access to water in schools, 91 schools were provided with access to handwashing facilities. In addition, 99 schools have had improved access to water supply through an innovative small grant initiative benefitting approximately 13,339 students. Mobilization on WASH-related issues brought together nearly 200 key players in three municipalities helping communities to better understand the importance of access to water supply and adequate toilets for students in schools. Community mobilization events focused on the role of parents, school leaders, students and the community in the maintenance and operation of WASH facilities in schools.

UNICEF supported a study to determine the extent of learning loss among children due to school closure. A total of 35,475 students from Grades 1-9 participated in the paper-based test which assessed literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional well-being. Tests were conducted with support of teachers and partners in the field. Data analysis is ongoing, and the final report will be available in March 2022. A Back-to-School campaign was conducted accompanied with key messages about the importance of maintaining safety protocols, helping children to catch up on learning and supporting children with the new demands as they return to school.

UNICEF provided support to implementation of 104 Community Based Preschools (CBPS) in two target municipalities benefitting 2,892 children (1,494 boys and 1,398 girls). The School readiness programme, which focuses on children in grade one who did not attend preschool, reached 908 students (458 boys, 450 girls) in 11 basic education schools to prepare them to transition smoothly to formal schooling.

These interventions focusing on the provision of learning opportunities were accompanied by important support in policy and programming. UNICEF supported an evaluation of the pre-primary education sub-sector, which is underway. The evaluation assesses the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of the early childhood education policy and programmes, identifies lessons learned and makes recommendations to inform decision-making on policy/programme design. A draft re-entry policy was reviewed and is awaiting endorsement to ensure children who temporarily left school could return.

60 students (30 female, 30 male) were trained on student council activities with a focus on empowering students through their participation and involvement in school activities, school management and promoting initiative and cooperation among students, school leaders and parents. Student councils were encouraged to promote safety, cleanliness and good hygiene, conducive school environment free from violence, and positive values consistent with Timorese culture.

Frequent closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic, severely impeded progress of planned activities. Municipal borders were closed during the pandemic-related lockdown and activities requiring travel and large group gatherings had to be postponed to the end of the year.

Child protection

In 2021, progress towards prevention and response to violence against boys and girls was improved through a strengthened child protection system. Among other results, 400 families were empowered with information on good parenting practices, 7,000 under-five children had their birth registered, and capacity of State and non-State social welfare workers was enhanced to provide comprehensive and coordinated assistance to vulnerable children and families.

To ensure that every child can access child protection services, UNICEF provided technical assistance and support to the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion (MSSI) in revising and
implementing a comprehensive social welfare workforce training curriculum that encapsulates the key principles of the Child and Family Welfare Policy. In 2021, training efforts continued and targeted 259 multidisciplinary social welfare workers including MSSI staff, teachers, police officers, health workers, staff of shelters for child survivors of violence, local authorities, community leaders, media and NGOs representatives in three municipalities.

UNICEF supported MSSI to undertake the Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) endline survey of the positive parenting programme in selected administrative posts of the pilot municipalities of Ermera and Viqueque, with the municipalities of Liquica and Lautem as control group, to measure changes since the baseline survey. The survey revealed a significant positive change in parents and caregivers’ knowledge, attitudes, and practices towards children, and offered lessons to improve the programme. Furthermore, under the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative, UNICEF supported MSSI to revise the existing parenting education modules through gender and disability lenses.

To achieve universal birth registration, particularly for under-five children, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to conduct a mobile birth registration campaign in two municipalities, Lautem and Manatuto, that concluded with around 7,000 children registered, 25 per cent of whom received their birth certificates. In addition, to improve birth registration services, UNICEF supported MoJ to develop a birth registration manual. This manual will be used by civil registry officers, community chiefs, and midwives to properly and timely process birth registrations.

A significant result this year refers to advances in child protection legislation. UNICEF supported the National Parliament to review the draft “Protection Law for Children and Youth in Danger.” This law will introduce a new child protection framework in the country. The draft was approved by Commission F of the National Parliament and presented for public consultations and technical discussions, and it is now under finalization process. In 2022, the draft law will be discussed by the National Parliament in plenary, before approval.

UNICEF also led the development of a behaviour change communications strategy for prevention of gender-based violence, and formulated two episodes of a popular behaviour change TV series, and additional video, audio and print material to drive action to end violence in intimate relationships, in homes, amongst youth and communities.

During the April floods, UNICEF supported MSSI and CSO partners to establish 13 Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) in evacuation centres in Dili and delivered non-food items to displaced population. In these spaces, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) activities were delivered to children. Over the course of the response, UNICEF provided a series of training for volunteers on Psychological First Aid training and on CFS activities that then benefitted more than 1,600 children. After evacuation centres closed, CFSs continued their activities in 23 affected communities as part of community based MHPSS interventions, reaching 2,409 children. Moreover, 85 CFS volunteers were trained to deliver parenting education to the parents of children attending CFS MHPSS activities.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF continued to provide support to the Ministry of Health in the operationalization of the mental health hotline, which received 1,927 calls. In addition, UNICEF supported MSSI to establish a web- and application-based Child Protection Online Platform that serves as source for relevant child protection tools and guidelines.

Social Policy

UNICEF supported the Government to strengthen its long-term capacity to focus on the most vulnerable children through pro-poor, equity-focused policies, programmes and budgets.

A major success was the adoption by the Ministry of Finance of a national measurement of
multidimensional poverty for children, women and men, enabling Timor-Leste to report against SDG indicator 1.2.2, with a first measure using 2014 data (54.3 per cent children, 56.5 per cent women and 54.2 per cent men), and an expected future measure in 2023, based on the upcoming Standards of Living Survey. The methodology was developed, with UNICEF support, by the National Statistics Office (NSO), and is adapted to the Timorese context.

Another key achievement was the Government’s adoption of a child marker to be used in State planning and budgeting, integrated in the public financial management system. The child marker will enable the Government and civil society child rights advocates to track budget allocations that support child rights, thus increasing transparency and accountability. This initiative developed through close collaboration with the Prime Minister’s Office and the Commission on the Rights of the Child will help bring to the fore equity issues in the State budget.

UNICEF provided technical assistance to the Government to establish INDDICA, a new child rights institution to replace the Commission on the Rights of the Child. The internal regulations, structure, and other documents to set up the new institution were developed, paving the way for operationalizing a better resourced institution with an expanded mandate.

UNICEF supported evidence generation, including the Situation Analysis of Children; the UN-wide 2021 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19, whose results helped inform the 2022 State budget discussions; and perception surveys on COVID-19 vaccination, which helped the Ministry of Health refine vaccine deployment and communication strategies. The formative evaluation of community-led total sanitation, commissioned by the Ministry of Health, was completed, and an evaluation of the early education sub-sector, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, is underway.

Finally, UNICEF increased its focus on disabilities, with support to organizations of persons with disabilities after the floods, and with disability assessments in the Secretariat of State for Youth and Sports (SSYS) office and several youth centres.

**Youth Empowerment**

2021 created opportunities for adolescents and youth to be active partners in humanitarian action. UNICEF support included fostering a dialogue between youth and line ministries on the needs of youth in the context of COVID-19; and providing non-food items to support youth in their efforts to help their communities clean up after the floods.

In partnership with SSYS, UNICEF supported the training and plenary session of the Youth Parliament, integrating new topics (a briefing on the State budget by the Ministry of Finance, and a session on gender equality and violence prevention) and conducting a gender assessment of the training, which will inform the Youth Parliament curriculum redesign in 2022. UNICEF also mentored youth groups who undertook a research on internet use among adolescents and youth.

Forty-nine children reporters were engaged by community radio stations in six municipalities to develop programmes on challenges they face and calls for action, while a popular social media platform, Hamutuk ita Rezolve (Together we can), was used as a medium of connecting to adolescents and youth online and driving awareness on managing stress and mental health, keeping safe online, preventing teenage pregnancy, digital literacy and how to manage online businesses for youth.
UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

During 2021, UNICEF Timor-Leste further deepened its partnerships with the Government, donors, other UN agencies and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).


Within the institutional structure of the response to COVID-19, UNICEF played a critical role in of the Risk Communications and Community Engagement sub-Group, helping develop the national behaviour change communications strategy for the vaccination campaign and awareness material.

Within the UN System;

- UNICEF partnered with WHO to provide an efficient and effective support to the Government’s response to COVID-19, including the launch of vaccination campaigns first for the adult population and later for the group of children from 12 to under 18 years of age.

- As an implementing agency of the Spotlight Initiative to end violence against women and girls, UNICEF, together with UN Women, UNFPA, UNDP and ILO, is contributing to four of the six pillars of the joint programme

- Partnering with ILO, UNICEF is supporting the Ministry of Finance and the Secretariat of State for Training and Employment (SEFOPE) to conduct a research on child labour.

- Together with other UN agencies, UNICEF contributed to the post-disaster needs assessment of the April 2021 floods leading the nutrition, WASH and education sectors and to the Socio-economic impact assessment of COVID-19.

- Together with WFP, UNICEF advocated for the inclusion of salt iodization in the food fortification law.

- UNICEF also helped strengthen joint communications within the UN system after taking over as Chair of the UN Communications Group at the end of September 2021.

- In the area of Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (PSEA), UNICEF joined forces with other agencies to develop common PSEA assessment tools. In addition, UNICEF assessed all of its civil society partners against PSEA standards and is supporting those with higher risk to develop appropriate tools and guidelines.

UNICEF also partnered with Civil Society Organizations including academic institutions like the University of Western Australia, national NGOs like the Association of Disabled Persons of Timor-Leste, youth-led organizations like the Alumni Association of the National Youth Parliament and international NGOs like Plan International and Childfund Australia.

UNICEF also continued advocacy with donors and development partners to drive support, visibility
and funding for child rights. This included broadening the partnership base by adding new donors such as the US Embassy, the Korean National Committee, as well as new types of funding, such as contribution in-kind from the government of New Zealand. UNICEF also engaged with development partners to highlight the most critical issues of children. For example, UNICEF engaged with select partners on advocacy for increased and more effective investment in holistic approach to children nutrition, especially in the first 1,000 days.

**Lessons Learned and Innovations**

Following the floods and UNICEF assistance to the national response, an internal exercise helped define lessons learnt for future emergencies. The experience highlighted the need to continue to ensure that contingency stocks are available and prepositioned in country. A challenge that remains is the availability of storage space for prepositioned relief items, as well as the cost implications of adequate, long-term storage solutions. Moreover, UNICEF’s emergency response to the flooding has helped bring attention to the specific needs of children in emergencies, and particularly the need for protection and psychosocial support. The humanitarian response has contributed to building momentum for longer-term programming. For instance, as most families have returned to their homes and evacuation centres have gradually closed, the child-friendly spaces have gradually transitioned to community-based support. These will continue to support children affected by the floods, by helping to activate and restore support within community and families, aimed at preventing and addressing domestic violence, child abuse and neglect. In terms of innovation, to access communities stranded by the floods a floating raft fixed with 10,000-liters bladder tank was fabricated and deployed to provide them with access to water.

UNICEF spearheaded a number of initiatives to provide the tools and capacity for opinion leaders, donors, the private sector, media and youth to highlight issues faced by children and families and influence positive actions. The commitment of different actors was sought by engaging with national, religious, business and youth leaders on specific issues, such as the need for passage of long-stalled legislations, increased budget allocations for social sectors, prevention of infection or spread of COVID-19 (including vaccination), prevention of violence, and safe learning environments for children. UNICEF also worked with the Commission on the Rights of the Child to coordinate the National Child Rights Advocacy Network to discuss challenges children faced including due to the COVID-19 pandemic and call for action to support children. UNICEF also supported the Network’s engagement with the National Parliament on the development of the Children Protection law.

Another noteworthy innovation was the development of courses for out-of-school adolescents/youth through partnerships with INSPER University, Brazil and Massachusetts Institute of Technology D-Lab providing opportunity for alternative learning pathways. These courses on subjects like basic financial literacy course and 9 STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics) courses focus on 21st century skills of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity and include modules such as climate change, reusable sanitary pads, upcycling, handwashing, food preservation, etc. The courses were developed through an innovative approach engaging youth as co-creators to ensure the courses were relevant and attractive for Timorese youth. The courses are available on the Learning Passport platform and will be offered in 2022 at six (6) Community Learning Centers (CLC) providing alternative learning pathways for out of school adolescents and youth.

An innovative funding scheme supported by UNICEF called ‘Fundu Ki’ik’ (Small Grant), launched in March by MoEYS, is helping schools in all municipalities to access clean water and help them protect children against COVID-19 and other diseases like diarrhea. Under the scheme, selected schools are provided a maximum of USD 1,000 each to help them improve access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. Schools that have not had access to a water source, sometimes for longer than
10 years, now have access to water freeing up students’ and teachers’ time from having to fetch water during breaks. The Small Grant initiative has generated much enthusiasm and active involvement from parents and communities and several schools continue to apply for the scheme.

Another innovative practice in 2021 was the ‘reporting back to communities’ exercise that took place upon the completion of the country-led formative evaluation of community-led total sanitation (CLTS) in Timor-Leste. The enumerators went back to 18 of the 21 sites where they had previously conducted focus group discussions in order to communicate the evaluation findings. A summary of the findings, written in plain language, as well as innovative sanitation practices that had been identified during data collection, and photos of the community, were shared mainly with local leaders, as community members tended to be busy with livelihood activities. This ‘giving back’ was much appreciated at community level and sets a new standard for the Country Office on accountability for population taking part in evidence generation activities.