**Update on the context and situation of children**

As 2020, the year 2021 continued to be marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, political transition and economic fragility.

The arrival of the COVID-19 Delta variant combined with low vaccination rates during the first semester of 2021 resulted in a major increase in infections, and in mid-July the country registered the world’s worst COVID-19 case fatality ratio (Agence France Presse, August 2021). This put most of public life to a halt during the months of July and August 2021.

The health emergency came on top of an economic crisis: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Tunisia’s economy has been severe with a contraction of 9.2% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020, only partially recovered in 2021 (+3%) (World Bank Tunisia Economic Monitor, January 2022); and a political crisis between the President, Prime Minister and Speaker of the Parliament, ongoing since January 2021, became even more critical. On 25 July 2021, the President dismissed the Prime Minister and put the activities of the Parliament on hold, largely backed by the population, and assumed the role of head of government based on a situation of national emergency. A new government headed by the first woman in the Arab region to hold the position of Prime Minister was later appointed in October 2021, with major changes introduced at political and administrative levels. In December 2021, the President announced national consultations for early 2022, a Referendum on the Constitution in July 2022 and legislative elections in December 2022, prolonging the suspension of the Parliament until then.

Due to the political turmoil, negotiations for a new finance programme with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were put on hold and Tunisia's credit rating was downgraded in October 2021 to Caa1 (Moodys, October 2021), representing a very high credit risk, negatively impacting the country's ability to access international financial markets. Tunisia benefited from important Official Development Assistance over the past decade, including to support democratic transition. However, statements by the Group of Seven (G7) indicate support may be on hold until functioning of democratic institutions are restored. (G7 joint statements on Tunisia, September and December 2021).

The international community provided major support to the health sector over the course of 2021, including with significant donations of the COVID-19 vaccine through the COVAX initiative, or via other channels, multi-laterally and bilaterally, with medical equipment, and personnel protective equipment for health workers. With the support from the military in the roll out of the vaccination campaign since July 2021 Tunisia rapidly increased its vaccination rates and reduced the pressure on the health system, enabling the country to get the pandemic back under control by September 2021.

Monetary poverty has significantly increased in Tunisia since the start of the pandemic, rising from 14% in 2019 to 21% in 2020 (World Bank Tunisia Economic Monitor, December 2020), and with the economy's slow recovery unemployment rate rose to 18.4% by the third quarter of 2021 (World Bank Tunisia Economic Monitor, January 2022). Child poverty is estimated to have increased from 21% in 2019 to 29% in 2020, with over 1 million children living in poverty (UNICEF study on child poverty, July 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to affect the normal functioning of the education sector in 2021, considering halved contact hours in schools throughout the 2020-2021 school year to facilitate physical distancing. Tunisia was among the few countries in the region to ensure a full back to school in
presence in September 2021, a major milestone to ensure all children, including the most vulnerable, resume their learning in presence. Overall, however, the COVID-19 disruptions since 2020 may account for the worst learning loss in recent times and will negatively impact children’s learning outcomes, already under pressure before the COVID-19 crisis. According to the Ministry of Education, around 79,000 children dropped out of school in 2021 mainly due to negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihoods of the most vulnerable families. On the other side, Tunisia officially joined the Global Partnership for Education in July 2021. This is an important opportunity to strengthen partnerships and investments in the education sector towards SDG4 going forward.

The Water, Hygiene and Sanitation (WASH) situation in institutions is of particular concern in terms of Infection Prevention and Control in the COVID-19 context. Preliminary results of the national assessment of WASH in institutions conducted in 2021 indicate that one in three health care facilities has either limited or no access to basic water services; one in four toilets in health care facilities is out of work due to lack of maintenance; and one in four schools is not connected to a reliable water source, with over 400 schools (7%) not connected to a water source at all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered and exacerbated existing system fragilities but also provided an opportunity to address some of these as part of the COVID-19 national response. The increase in poverty levels and disruptions in public service provision however may further undermine social cohesion, reinforcing the need to focus on the leave no one behind agenda going forward.

**Major contributions and drivers of results**

The year 2021 was exceptional in different ways. While facing an unprecedented situation with the COVID-19 response and the support to COVAX and AVAT, which required an extraordinary mobilization of office capacity as well as of resources and funds, with flexibility in addressing the epidemiological situation in the country and supporting staff health, the office was also able to finalize the new Country Programme (approved by the Executive Board in February 2021), to develop a new Country Programme Management Plan by May 2021, with new posts established and mostly recruited by December 2021, and to successfully complete an Internal Audit from February to May 2021, with all recommendations closed by end of 2021.

A major milestone for young children in 2021 has been the increase and consolidation of the social protection scheme for under 5 years old from poor and vulnerable families. Thanks to Germany support to UNICEF, the Ministry of Social Affairs was able to reach almost 129,000 young children (52% boys, 48% girls) by end 2021, up from 50,000 in 2020, representing approximately 12% of children in this age group. This support arrived just ahead of the peak in COVID-19 infections and was particularly important to support parents to meet their children’s needs as most of public life was put to a halt. This support, initiated as part of UNICEF’s COVID-19 response, is helping to protect the investment in human capital for the most vulnerable children through the COVID-19 crisis while also supporting the institutionalization of a child benefit as part of national social protection programmes. Thanks to a World Bank budget support programme, the child grant will continue throughout the biennium 2022-2023, ensuring sustained investments in human capital in the COVID context, and a progressive transition to the national budget. The introduction of a sustainable universal child grant as a key strategy to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 targets on reducing child poverty for children will continue to require sustained advocacy as part of major socio-economic reforms, including the subsidies reform, as the fiscal space is reducing in the current COVID-19 context (UNICEF supported fiscal space analysis, July 2021).

Throughout 2021, as the year marked the 75th anniversary of its establishment, UNICEF used all opportunities to highlight the risks for children and the evidence of increasing child poverty, the
learning crisis and worsening prospects towards achieving child-related SDG targets in Tunisia, in a programming context marked by a difficult economic situation, the continued COVID-19 pandemic affecting all aspects of society and the persistent political uncertainty.

Following the presentation of the 4th to 6th combined State Party report, the Committee on the Rights of the Child issued Final Observations to Tunisia, a key advocacy ally for all stakeholders leading the child rights agenda going forward. Advocacy in high level meetings with government officials at the occasion of the UNICEF Regional Director visit to Tunisia in October 2021 also highlighted the importance of establishing an independent child right body or Ombudsman, and a high-level committee to coordinate national policies for children and adolescents across all government actors and the life course.

UNICEF also continued to support the strengthening of child-friendly procedures for children in conflict and in contact with the law. New in-service and pre-service training modules for police forces and family judges and auditors dealing with children in contact with the law were developed and field tested, working closely with the Police and National Guard Academies and the Higher Institute of Justice, and over 200 vulnerable children (83% boys, 17% girls) in conflict with the law received free legal representation coupled with capacity building and advocacy for alternatives to deprivation of liberty, working the Juvenile Justice Office in the Ministry of Justice and civil society organisations.

COVID-19 infection rates hit record high levels mid-2021 resulting in a critical situation for Tunisia’s health system. However, thanks to combined efforts from all sides, the COVID-19 vaccination campaign rapidly increased. As of 31st December 2021, 6 million people completed their vaccination, representing approximately 51% of the country’s population (World Health Organization (WHO) COVID-19 dashboard with vaccination data, December 2021). Tunisia was among the few African countries reaching and surpassing the WHO target of 40% of the population fully vaccinated by 2021. The provision of a booster dose and vaccination of children above 12 years old were also decided in December 2021.

UNICEF, working in close collaboration with WHO, actively supported the Government of Tunisia with the implementation, monitoring, communication and social mobilization around the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, including through the purchase and delivery of vaccines. In March 2021, Tunisia received the first batch of COVID-19 vaccines through the COVAX initiative, and by the end 2021, UNICEF delivered 4.8 million vaccine doses through the COVAX and AVAT initiatives, contributing to the vaccination of approximately 24% of Tunisia’s population. UNICEF continued to support upgrading of the national immunization cold chain, with over 220 cold chain refrigerators and freezers, 3 ultra-cold freezers and fridge tags to cover around 80% of the needs to monitor vaccine temperature nationwide serving both the needs of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign and routine immunization, and, as an additional contribution to quality data and effective routine vaccine management, supported the piloting of a single e-vaccination card and digital data reporting platform (TUNeVACC).

UNICEF also continued to sustain the roll-out of public awareness communication on COVID-19 risks and preventive measures, and the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, reaching 9.5 million people, including over 6.5 million people through social media; working in partnership with the Scouts, over 5,100 volunteers engaged their communities on COVID-19 preventive measures and vaccination across the country, from high-risk populated areas to the most remote locations. Finally, the support to the health response included the provision of more than 370 oxygen concentrators (about 10% of total COVID-19 response needs) and over 6 million gloves for health workers addressing a critical government personnel protective equipment stock out.

While the broader curriculum review continued to stall for most of 2021, primary and secondary programmes were readjusted across all levels to streamline content and include elements to
compensate the delays due to COVID-19 reduced contact hours in the previous school year. Work also continued on pre- and in-service teacher training, with over 240 inspectors and pedagogical assistants (100%) trained to effectively coach internships of future teachers; and more than 60 trainers ready to scale-up in-service teacher training through the World Bank PREFAT programme.

Testing of models to prevent and respond to school drop-out has continued to progress in 2021. The 1st public Second Chance centre was inaugurated in Tunis in April by the Head of Government and four ministries; and more than 1,600 adolescents (71% boys, 29% girls) - 800 in 2nd chance centres and 850 in 9 pilot schools – benefited from orientation, catch-up education, and psychosocial support to continue their learning. Over 400 adolescents (77% boys, 23% girls) either returned to school or enrolled in vocational training programmes following orientation and support provided through the life-skills individualised second chance programme (data from the Second Chance centers, January 2022).

As children and adolescents are at increased risk of online violence due to the COVID-19-related lockdowns, reduced time spent in school and an increased use of internet, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Seniors to launch an online campaign in January 2021 on risks and ways to protect children on internet and social media, reaching over 1.6 million people, and supported the launch of a Portal to report internet child sexual abuse images and videos in June 2021, an initiative with International Watch Foundation supported by the Violence Against Children Alliance, adding to Tunisia's efforts in child protection.

Additionally, UNICEF supported the institutionalization of the 1809 hotline on violence against children: the line, set-up during the 2020 COVID-lockdown, was strengthened with new functionalities and provided psychosocial support and orientation to around 5,500 children and adolescents in 2021 (Ministry of Women, December 2021). Approximately 10,000 children and adolescents, and more than 6,000 parents and teachers were reached through awareness interventions on the importance of child protection and mechanisms existing at community level, particularly working in two disadvantaged governorates, Kasserine and Kairouan.

Finally, in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), UNICEF supported the collection of data on WASH infrastructure nationwide across 6,102 public schools, 2,058 health care facilities, 3,925 preschools and 2,575 other public centres hosting children based on the Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation standards. Data and analysis will be used to update progress against SDG targets 6.1 and 6.2 as well as sector planning and prioritization going forward.

COVID-19 preparedness and response capacities, particularly in the school environment, were at the core of WASH emergency work in 2021. All 6,102 public schools received cleaning and disinfectant supplies countrywide, strengthening the application of COVID-19 preventive protocols for 2021-year end exams and the back-to-school 2021-2022, reaching 2.3 million children (51% girls, 49% boys) and over 144,000 education staff (59% women, 41% men). This support was acknowledged by the Ministry of Education as critical to facilitate the continuity of learning in presence and full back to school in September 2021. In addition, UNICEF supported light rehabilitation in 151 schools, ensuring functional WASH infrastructures for over 62,000 children and education staff. Finally, thanks to UNICEF support, over 87,000 children and community members were reached in 2021 with hand hygiene and COVID-19 prevention messages, training and community development activities, particularly in schools, and around 1,000 school children with new WASH infrastructures in their school.
UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

2021 was the first year of implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (2021-2025) and UNICEF played a key role in supporting the coordination efforts as lead of the Outcome 3 Results Group – resilient health, education and social protection systems.

Throughout 2021, UNICEF further strengthened its close collaboration with WHO in support of the Government's COVID-19 preparedness and response plan, including through close cooperation in the context of the COVAX initiative. Joint funding for WHO and UNICEF was successfully mobilised through GAVI to support the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign. The pandemic and introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine has shown the importance of solid health sector coordination mechanisms, including health partners coordination, even in middle-income countries like Tunisia, to ensure adequate preparedness and response capacities.

With UNICEF’s technical and financial assistance, almost 129,000 children aged 0-5 years old from poor and vulnerable households were reached with top-up cash transfers of 30 dinars per child per month, the amount recommended for the establishment of a universal child benefit in Tunisia. The initiative triggered the establishment of a World Bank (WB) support to Tunisia to continue the programme through the national budget support for the biennium 2022-2023, with the number of children estimated to increase to 150,000. The collaboration between the WB and UNICEF has been excellent on this initiative, building on each others’ strengths, including for example the outcomes of the external programme evaluation being used as a disbursement indicator (benchmark) for the WB programme to start. In addition, UNICEF supported the establishment of the web-platform for the registration of 1,000,000 beneficiaries for exceptional WB cash support of 300 dinars per family in September 2021.

In cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the WB, UNICEF supported the organisation of a workshop in September 2021, under the leadership of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, to establish a national dashboard monitoring Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), gender and child sensitive budget allocations and spending. Although Tunisia ranks first among the countries of North Africa and the Middle East with a 72% SDG achievement in 2021, the COVID-19 crisis will negatively impact Tunisia’s progresses, and all efforts will be required to mitigate the negative socio-impacts of the pandemic on the ability of children to achieve their full potential. UNICEF will therefore support engagement with the broader range of actors dealing with the national budget, providing tools for evidence based and equity focused advocacy on human capital.

UNICEF also continued to work closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on contingency planning and emergency preparedness, ensuring the UN lead on the WASH sector, including the contribution to ground works at the Ras Jdir border.

In 2021, 31.1 million USD was mobilized (the German Cooperation/KfW and GIZ, USAID, Japan, the Gavi Alliance, the United Kingdom and the European Investment Bank), representing a 35% increase in donor contributions as compared to 2020, and exceeding in the 1st year of the country programme the Other Resources target for the cycle.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

The COVAX initiative represented significant additional and extraordinary effort for the country office which was already juggling its additional workload due to the consequences of the pandemic on programme implementation and staff wellbeing. In addition, as doses started to arrive relatively late in March 2021, considering the pressures faced in the country it represented a potential reputational risk for UNICEF, as the it was not in the office’s control neither the overall availability of vaccines from
the global vaccine supply chain nor the possibility to give to all COVAX donors the necessary visibility and recognition, which was primarily managed at global level. This required additional strategic efforts to ensure adequate logistic support, advocacy and communication, as well as managing when possible the necessary visibility for key donors, in particular for the doses-sharing mechanism of COVAX. This was particularly challenging as the situation was constantly evolving and required maximum flexibility to adjust to the office’s priorities. Looking back over the year, the initiative has however paid off in terms of the high number of vaccines it was able to mobilize, and lives saved, the strong support provided to the Tunisian government and particularly to the Ministry of Health, and the solid relationships built or consolidated with all partners and donors as a result. Indeed, the dose-sharing mechanism provided significant relief to Tunisia and helped the country to rapidly scale-up vaccination rates.

On the other hand, the pandemic and introduction of the COVID-19 vaccine has also shown the importance of solid health sector coordination mechanisms, including health partners coordination by the government, even in middle-income countries like Tunisia, to ensure adequate preparedness and response capacities. Many partners have responded positively to the COVID-19 crisis in mid-2021, providing equipment, personal protective equipment etc. and the multiple support and efforts could have been more effective with stronger coordination at all levels.

On another positive note, the partnership with Scouts, mobilising over 5,100 volunteers on COVID-19 prevention and the vaccine, was particularly effective. In response to low registration levels for COVID-19 vaccination in rural areas, UNICEF mobilised the Scouts to support people with their registration on the Ministry of Health digital vaccination platform (https://www.evax.tn/ar/index.html), and after one month the number of registrations exceeded 3 million, an increase of more than 300% compared to registrations before the launch of the "Talki7" campaign.

In terms of innovation, in continuity with its support for quality data and effective routine vaccine management, UNICEF started the pilot introduction of a single e-vaccination card and digital data reporting platform (TUNeVACC) in 2021 in Sousse and Kasserine, with two selected Primary Health Care Centres in both Governorates. The TUNeVACC platform enables the registration of children, vaccine stock management and data reporting. QR codes included in the vaccination card can be scanned in the platform to access personal data. The platform also includes an immunization schedule and is set up to send a reminder message to parents’ phones one week before the scheduled vaccination date of their child. All the vaccinators of the pilot centres received tablets to have access to the TUNeVACC platform and began using these tools on 1 December 2021. The pilot testing will allow for feedback and resolution of usability issues before the expected scale up of the platform.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to highlight the importance of the WASH sector and strengthen work around sector data, coordination, and fundraising. This is also an opportune time for UNICEF as WASH is among the new areas of focus of the new UNSDCF and UNICEF CPD. In terms of innovations in this area, in 2021 UNICEF has supported the introduction of the Kobotoolbox to modernise and digitalize data collection in public institutions through the WASH assessment. The use of online platforms enables the digitalisation of data from the data collection stage, improving efficiency, reliability and replicability of the process over time as already shown by the replication of surveys by the ministries of Education, Health and Women to other areas.

Under the positive parenting programme, a barber shop in Jendouba is successfully teaching male clients about positive parenting techniques, reaching fathers, fathers-to-be and grandfathers with messaging on how to better connect with and be there for their children. This experience was identified for bringing interesting insights and potential replication.

A situation analysis of the private sector was launched in 2021 to identify opportunities to advance the rights of children in Tunisia. The exercise enabled UNICEF to undertake advocacy on child right
issues and raise awareness about the challenges facing children also with the private sector. It also led to the country office getting an invitation to the Chief Executive Officers Arab Institute Annual high-level private sector event, in which UNICEF was the only UN agency invited to take part in a High Level Panel to address the issue of future opportunities for young people.

Finally, UNICEF’s strong technical support and drive for studies to enable holistic planning and the identification of root causes to challenges, as well as the responsiveness of the Country Office’s support provided as part of the national COVID-19 response, are appreciated by the Government and donors alike, representing a strong advocacy tool for fund mobilization.