Update on the context and situation of children

The political and economic situation of Turkmenistan remained stable in 2021 despite the external shocks caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic and instability in the neighboring Afghanistan. According to official data GDP grew by 6.2 percent during the first three quarters of 2021, which represents a slight increase compared to 5.9 percent for the same period in 2020. In light of the global economic impact of the pandemic and disruptions to trade, IMF estimates the real economic growth of Turkmenistan for 2021 at 4.5 percent which follows a 3.5 percent GDP contraction in 2020.

By the end of 2021 there were still no officially recorded cases of COVID-19 in the country and no other information on the epidemiological situation is available. The declared strategy of Turkmenistan has been to prevent the importation and spread of COVID-19, and therefore, strict infection prevention measures continued in 2021. There are no external commercial flights in and out of Turkmenistan since March 2020, internal movements are restricted, requirements on testing and mask wearing are in place, and mandatory two-weeks quarantine is ongoing.

Since the beginning of the global pandemic three waves of Severe Acute Respiratory Infections (SARIs) -like cases were noted in Turkmenistan, in June-July 2020, November-December 2020, and the latest in August-September 2021. It was observed that these periods are usually associated with overflown hospitals and queues at the pharmacies and followed by additional restrictions such as closure of public places (malls, restaurants).

The Government in collaboration with the UN Country Team, continued to implement the Country Preparedness and Response Plan to ensure sanitary and epidemiological control, the Immediate Socio-Economic Response Plan as a support package for the most vulnerable, and the 2021-2022 National Plan for the Introduction and Distribution of COVID-19 Vaccines which ensured rapid deployment and ongoing vaccination of the population against the virus. Ministry of Health and Medical Industry reported that 5.4 million doses of the following types of vaccines have been procured by the Government: i) AstraZeneca, ii) Sinopharm, iii) Sinovac, iv) Sputnik V, v) EpiVacCorona, and vi) Sputnik Light. As of 23 September 2021, 72% of the population above the age of 18 has been vaccinated with at least one dose and 53% with two doses according to the Ministry.

In July 2021 the World Bank approved US$ 20 million loan to the Government of Turkmenistan for the COVID-19 Response Project. The loan, implemented with the support of UNDP, WHO, and UNICEF, will assist priority activities under the Country Pandemic Preparedness and Response Plan and cover a range of initiatives to strengthen health system capacities and risk communication.

Information on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on businesses as well as on families and children is limited. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) conducted in 2021 showed that 5.3% of workers lost their jobs, primarily among individual entrepreneurs which constitute 28% of employed. These are people working in retail trade, hospitality, construction, car servicing, agriculture, and education
sectors. About half of all surveyed households (49%) indicated that their economic condition has changed compared to the period before 2020.

Although the results available from LFS are partial, the actual impact of COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have reached wider groups of population especially the most vulnerable according to the Immediate Socio-Economic Response Plan to acute infectious disease. These include men and women working in the informal economy, young people looking for employment opportunities, women at risk of domestic violence, rural populations with lack of access to quality social infrastructure, people and children with disabilities, the elderly living alone or caring for the grandchildren, and migrants with precarious livelihoods.

The newly established community-based social services as part of UN Joint Programme on Social Protection identified in 2021, 675 households comprising 3,100 individuals, including 1,241 children, in need of assistance. Among them 37% required a comprehensive assessment or immediate response. These figures show the existence of vulnerable groups in the country, although there is no national definition of vulnerability and its trends in the context of global pandemic.

People and children with disabilities face a higher risk of exclusion from mainstream education, labour market and community life, whereas socio-economic impact of COVID-19 is expected to have aggravated their situation. Available data indicates the number of recipients of disability benefits in Turkmenistan rose from 112,000 in 2013 to 170,700 in 2020, while the number of children beneficiaries doubled during the same period. At the same time, the share of children with disabilities out of the total number of children in residential care institutions shows an increase from 79% in 2009 to 87% in 2019 according to Statistics Committee. The root causes are the limited services, prevailing attitudes, and reliance on institutional care.

In September 2021 schools opened and continue to operate to date with precautionary measures, including reduced class size and length of lessons. The new modalities of the education process continued to pose an additional burden on teachers, of which 68% are women, thus causing increased exposure to work-related stress. Pre-existing conditions with limited social workers or school counselors may impact the emotional wellbeing of teachers, schoolchildren, and parents, especially from the most vulnerable families.

Since mid-2021, the security situation in Afghanistan and in the bordering countries rapidly deteriorated with the withdrawal of all NATO troops and the sudden change of Taliban governance in the country. These developments exacerbated the already complex humanitarian situation following decades of continuing conflict in Afghanistan. Although there are no official reports of refugee arrivals to Turkmenistan so far, the situation remains uncertain with the risk of potential refugee influx to Turkmenistan and other Central Asian countries. Government continues high level dialogues with the new state structures of Afghanistan on issues of border security, humanitarian assistance, and resuming cross-border projects. Meanwhile, UNHCR, UNICEF and UNFPA in Turkmenistan supported the development of the 2022 Regional Refugee Response Plan on Afghanistan Situation to ensure that UN is prepared to provide timely and effective response in the event of emergency.
Every child has an equitable chance in life

In 2021, the Government of Turkmenistan demonstrated continued leadership in the implementation of the UN SDG Fund-supported Joint Programme on Social Protection and achieved a transformative change in the current system of social service delivery following introduction of community-based social services in the country. With UNICEF advocacy and technical advice, 45 social workers have been trained and embedded in the staff structure of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection and the state allocation has been made in the national budget to cover related staff costs in 2022. This established the first country capacity of social service workforce at community level in 20 out of 58 districts of the country. Advocacy continues for additional budget allocations and fiscal space creation for community based social services in every district of Turkmenistan.

In the frame of the same initiative, after more than two years of joint work between UN Agencies and the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, a major milestone has been achieved with the endorsement by Parliament in December 2021 of the new Law on Social Services. UNICEF prepared a set of recommendations to the Law, including recognition of social work as a specialization in the sector and placing the interests of children at the core of the legislation. Together with UNFPA, UNICEF worked on the definitions and the content of the specialized social services for vulnerable families and children in the new legal framework of Turkmenistan.

In July 2021, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection successfully launched a new model of inclusive community-based services for children at risk of separation from parents, children without parental care and those with disabilities in the capital and two regions of the country (Mary and Lebap velayats). UNICEF supported the Ministry with the piloting of the new services and provided technical guidance to the new social workers for case management. The outcome of the new community-based social services established with support of UNICEF and other UN agencies, are the 2,335 vulnerable people including 934 children which have been identified, assessed and received support in 2021.

UNICEF Turkmenistan secured the commitment of the Office of Ombudsperson, who later drafted the first-ever alternative report for Turkmenistan, which will be finalized in 2022 and submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2023. The draft includes the views and opinions of 150 children from all over the country and findings of monitoring visits to the residential care institutions. This is part of UNICEF technical assistance and capacity building of the Office of Ombudsperson in monitoring child rights.

The continuing partnership with the Mejlis of Milli Gengesh (Parliament of Turkmenistan) continued in 2021 and expanded the coverage of children familiar with the provision of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in the country. This experience, ongoing during the last 10 years as part of Mejlis and UNICEF cooperation in Turkmenistan, has been shared during the ECA Regional Consultation meeting of Parliamentarians in December 2021 and was acknowledged by the UNICEF Regional Director as a good practice.
UNICEF partnership with the State Statistics Committee continued to make inroads to support child-related SDG monitoring with the data analysis and development of the Progress for Every Child report in 2021 which contributed evidence to the National Mid-term Review on SDGs. At the same time the data gaps on SDG 1 and the workshop conducted by UNICEF jointly with the World Bank on Wellbeing Measurement, resulted in Government commitment to conduct the Survey on Wellbeing in Turkmenistan in 2022.

Every child survives and thrives

Prevention of COVID-19 infection including vaccination promotion, and continuity of essential mother and child health services during the pandemic, are the major achievements of the Government in 2021 to which UNICEF contributed in terms of policy development, procurement services, capacity building and risk communication information.

Routine immunization services for children continued as usual in Turkmenistan in 2021. UNICEF provided procurement services as part of its long-term MOU with the Government on supply of vaccines for routine immunization. Despite the global logistical challenges, UNICEF delivered the full quantity of planned vaccines for the regular immunization programme, which fulfilled its commitment towards the Government and ensured uninterrupted vaccination of children in the country. These efforts will maintain Turkmenistan’s positive trend, registered over the last decade, of near universal immunization coverage of children with regular vaccinations.

UNICEF comprehensive support to COVID-19 response in 2021 focused on infection prevention through risk communication and procurement support as part of Country Preparedness and Response Plan to Acute Infectious Diseases (CPRP), as well as roll out of vaccination through technical advice for the development and implementation of the 2021-2022 National Plan for the Introduction and Distribution of COVID-19 Vaccines. In 2021 procurement assistance increased, with UNICEF supporting 17,000 biohazard bags, 15,000 safety boxes for safe waste disposal and 2,000 child sphygmomanometers for pediatric intensive care units. Over 3,400 soap dispensers and 20,000 liters of liquid soap supported health workers’ compliance with IPC standards in 1,700 public health centers of the country. During October-November 2021, 600,000 surgical masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE) items have been distributed among medical workers of the Ministry of Health and Medical Industry (MoHMI). The items supported by UNICEF were critical in strengthening infection prevention in Turkmenistan during the challenging pandemic context.

As COVID-19 prevention measures continued in 2021, UNICEF further strengthened its digital presence relying on online platforms and provided regular up-to-date information on pandemic prevention, parenting tips, ECD messages, importance of vaccination, and other key health messages. Together with WHO, State TV Committee and Women's Union, UNICEF organized a series of mass-media briefs on risk communication and addressing misinformation during pandemic. Radio programmes on ECD, 8 video messages on Parenting during COVID-19, and joining the UN campaign with RCCE information sessions for children with disabilities, are some of the activities UNICEF implemented to support risk communication and engagement with population groups.
In 2021, UNICEF CO continued to support implementation of the National Nutrition programme for 2020-2025 to tackle the triple burden of malnutrition, including stunting, obesity, and anaemia. Despite the pandemic related implications, UNICEF technical assistance to the Government strengthened the Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) programme and scaled up the Baby-Friendly Hospitals Initiative. As a result, 8 PHC clinics and 2 etrap hospitals completed the preparedness work and for the first time received Baby-Friendly Certificate, and over 700 health care professionals were trained in IYCF.

UNICEF was able to focus the Ministry’s attention on unattended adolescent girls and women nutrition in 2021. With CO technical support, a training package for nutrition counselling of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women has been developed and 24 trainers were prepared to carry out nation-wide capacity building on this subject. The package includes information resource for training community workers and volunteers, and as a result of cooperation with the National Red Crescent Society, over 50 Red Crescent volunteers were trained in the basics of Infant Young Child Feeding and Early Childhood Development. UNICEF supported social media campaign during International and National Breastfeeding Weeks reached over 11,000 mothers with information on IYCF during the reporting year.

At the policy level, the main achievement in health sector was the endorsement of the national 2021-2025 RMNCAH Strategy, known as “Healthy Mother – Healthy Child – Healthy Future”, which envisions key actions to improve child survival and well-being. As part of its implementation, UNICEF supported MoHMI to revitalize the IMCI programme by developing a 5-year Road Map to scale up the programme, developed the IMCI training module and trained 52 health professionals as trainers. Considering the lack of clinical standards and protocols for management of childhood illnesses, upon MoHMI request, the work on improving the standards of pediatric disease management has been initiated this year and will continue in 2022 in cooperation with WHO and MoHMI expert group.

Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

During the first year of implementation of the new Child Protection programme component in Turkmenistan, the focus has been on evidence generation, review of regulatory frameworks and building partnerships. These foundational elements have been achieved in 2021 and ensured that justice for children is placed on Government policy agenda, thus paving the way for system strengthening going forward, including for institutional, capacity and normative changes in compliance with child protection international standards.

A vision on integrated child protection system strengthening, linked to broader welfare services and social support, has been developed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection based on the findings from a UNICEF-supported child protection assessment conducted in 2021. The vision includes recommendations for a) amendments of the regulations of referral bodies, b) provision of investment in social work profession delivered through a case management approach; and c) establishment of an effective mechanism to ensure integrated social and child protection services through referral bodies. The vision has been submitted for consideration as an ongoing social protection sector reform agenda, and as a priority for the new National Plan of Action for Child Rights
in Turkmenistan to be develop in 2022. This work will strengthen Government capacity to apply a systematic approach in addressing social and child protection issues and is aligned with UNSDCF Results Group 4 and SDGs 3, 5 and 16.

In the reporting period, the Government also placed greater attention on juvenile justice in the context of rule of law and justice sector reforms. UNICEF considered the current readiness of the Government to reform the juvenile justice system as an opportunity to strengthen justice for children in Turkmenistan. A review of legislative frameworks concerning children in contact with the law in light of international standards, led by the Inter-Ministerial Commission on Human Rights in collaboration with the Mejlis of Milli Gengesh (Parliament of Turkmenistan) and UNICEF, created an evidence-based approach to draft a long-term roadmap on justice for children system strengthening in Turkmenistan. UNICEF provided technical assistance to familiarize the justice sector ministries with the international child-specific standards and conducted a situational analysis of the current legislation as regards justice for children.

The introduction of the specialized approach towards children in contact with the law in line with the international justice for children standards was initiated in 2021. As a component of this approach, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Interior to outline an Inter-Agency Resolution for establishing specialized procedures for protecting child victims and witnesses of crime at the pre-trial stage. To advocate for these changes, UNICEF presented to justice professionals the best practices of specialized approaches and alternative sanctions successfully practised in other countries. The work will continue in 2022 with training of justice professionals, preparing guidelines for forensic interviewing of child victims and witnesses of crime, and setting up child-friendly interview rooms at pre-trial stage.

**Every child learns**

During the first year of the new Country Programme, progress has been made towards strengthening quality and inclusive learning at pre-school, primary and secondary school levels in Turkmenistan.

As a result of UNICEF advocacy and technical support, MoE developed a half day pre-primary curriculum for implementation across schools nationwide to overcome persisting geographic disparities in access to pre-primary preparation for children aged 5. Together with stronger national capacity of the pre-school education sector in monitoring child development, the efforts made in 2021 established the foundation for implementation of the pre-primary curriculum during 2022-2023 academic year.

UNICEF advocated for development of trans-disciplinary service provision across education, health and social protection sectors and enhancing the role of the medical-pedagogical commissions (MPCs) under the Ministry of Education as a gatekeeping mechanism for young CwD and to prevent further institutionalization. Following advocacy and ongoing capacity development of professionals from health, education and social protection sectors, the national capacity in trans-disciplinary service provision was strengthened. As a result, nine multidisciplinary teams provide individual support programmes for CwD and their families across Turkmenistan. Following an assessment of the current roles and functions of the MPCs, a detailed set of recommendations for reforming the MPCs
nationwide has been developed for further finalization and implementation in 2022.

Furthermore, UNICEF support to MoE on increasing the quality of education resulted in development of a roadmap aimed at introducing competency-based education and thereby strengthening the national capacity to deliver improved learning at schools. In the framework of the roadmap, education specialists from MoE, National Institute of Education, pedagogical institutes and colleges strengthened their capacities in designing competency-based curricula that support development of foundational, transferable, and digital skills of schoolchildren. As a result of these efforts, children at three pilot schools gained access to improved classroom learning thanks to UNICEF support on interactive and child-centred classroom practices provided in 2021, and more schools are expected to benefit in 2022.

In the area of distance and online education, UNICEF technical assistance to MoE increased the capacity of schoolteachers to support introduction of digital learning in their schools and to deliver education to children at distance. UNICEF support consisted of an introductory distance learning session and preparation of a training package which includes a training plan, presentations, and methodological guidelines, based on adapted international best practices, including educational materials prepared by UNICEF and UNESCO. The introductory training and the teaching package laid the ground for further joint work on digital education with MoE in 2022.

UNICEF is the lead agency in Turkmenistan supporting the adaption of the education system and children’s knowledge on environment and climate-change risks which resulted in improved learning opportunities for children in emergency and ongoing climate changing contexts. The in-service and pre-service training courses for teachers on Climate Change Adaptation developed by National Institute of Education with UNICEF technical support in 2021, will ensure that teachers are prepared to deliver the new Climate Change curriculum. UNICEF technical assistance to the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Education resulted in the development of a Child-centered Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy of Turkmenistan which is currently being finalized by the national partners. The strategy will strengthen the normative framework of Turkmenistan on DRR with the aim to reduce vulnerability and increase resilience of children and adolescents towards climate change impacts and natural hazards.

Continuity of school operation and creating a safe environment to learn has been a continuous priority for MoE and UNICEF in 2021 in the context of the pandemic. UNICEF delivered 2,000 hand sanitizers to schools and conducted online interactive sessions on hand hygiene and infection prevention. MoE, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Ministry of Health and Medical Industry participated in Education in Emergencies training organized by UNICEF ECA Regional Office, which resulted in increased national capacity in developing strategies to deliver education in fragile contexts and laid the foundation for establishing an Education in Emergencies coordination mechanism at national level.
Harnessing Joint Programmes and Results

UNICEF continued to leverage existing and new joint programmes in 2021 towards results for children. The first UN Joint Programme supported by UN SDG Fund on “Improving the System of Social Protection through the Introduction of Inclusive Quality Community-based Social Services” launched in 2020, not only strengthened the collaboration and synergies between Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP and UNODC, but also created space for mutual support and building on each other’s strength to achieve joint results. In 2021, this Joint Programme came to maturity and generated sustainable achievements thanks to all partners efforts, such as, 45 trained social workers which have been embedded in the staff structure of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and a new Law on Social Services. The key for effective implementation is regular coordination among partners at technical and management level and continuing technical advice secured with the establishment of the Technical Advisory Team. Building on this success, a new Joint Programme supported by UN HSTF on “Empowering and Engaging the Youth to Mitigate the Multi-Dimensional Threats of the Health Pandemic” has been launched in 2021, and the participating UN agencies now have the experience to successfully implement.

UN Communication Synergy

UNICEF stayed active within the UN communication and boosted its outreach on UN channels, with Representative chairing the UN Communication Group. UNICEF took part in UNRC campaign on COVID-19 infection prevention which was held on social media channels of all UN agencies, including offline sessions targeting people with disabilities, in December 2021. A month earlier, in November 2021, UNRC joined UNICEF, the civil society organization "Ýenme", and children with disabilities who participated in an inclusive Children’s Fest and took over the United Nations Office in Ashgabat. The purpose of the event was to engage children in learning activities about various aspects of UN work such as environment preservation, child rights, hand hygiene and emotional wellbeing. In addition, children had the chance to visit the office of UN Resident Coordinator, and of UNICEF Representative, conducted online meeting and signed some important documents relevant for children in Turkmenistan. UNICEF also supported to sensitize the public and stakeholders on the Joint UN Programme to introduce comprehensive social services in Turkmenistan and developed a video about services piloted for children. Leveraging social media networks among UN agencies amplifies the message and reaches out to wider population groups, especially young people.
Lessons Learned and Innovations

Blended Learning Approaches

The pandemic related restrictions on the international and in-country travels coupled with the generally weak quality of internet connectivity across the regions motivated UNICEF Turkmenistan Education Team to seek innovative approaches for ensuring quality and continuity of the ongoing technical support and to achieve the planned CPD targets. One of the innovative implementing modalities deployed in 2021 for the realization of the Partnership Cooperation Agreement with the St. Petersburg Early Intervention Institute (SPB EII) is delivery of blended forms of learning to the cross-sectoral partners from the health, education, and social protection sectors nation-wide. The blended modality used for the 6-module “training on preparation of the trans-disciplinary specialist” for 150 trainees across the country and sectors employed both online distance communication and learning, and offline self-study, facilitated by various communication formats. Blended learning modality demonstrated its effectiveness especially when larger volumes of knowledge need to be transmitted involving wider groups of participants.

Preparedness for Emergencies

In 2021 UNICEF Turkmenistan scaled up its emergency preparedness capacity to provide effective response in the event of potential emergencies. A renewed partnership was established with National Red Crescent Society, for the first time CO established warehousing capacity and prepositioned core emergency response supplies. Together, UNHCR, UNFPA and UNICEF strengthened the UN contingency planning for a potential Refugee Influx from Afghanistan by developing a Regional Refugee Response Plan which has been launched in an appeal event on 11 January 2022. Given Turkmenistan’s exposure to multiple risks (earthquakes, droughts, floods, sandstorms, epidemic) and increased vulnerability due to the volatile security situation in neighboring Afghanistan, the preparedness activities undertaken in 2021 and continuing, established a higher level of readiness and capacity to respond timely in the event of emergencies. UNICEF ECARO support and EMOPS Global Humanitarian Thematic Fund allocation, have made a valuable contribution in support of CO efforts.

UNICEF@75 in the Spotlight

In December 2021 UNICEF Turkmenistan joined the world in celebrations of its 75th anniversary, by conducting various activities in a creative way, and engaging in a series of global initiatives with the participation of the Government, youth, general population, and former and current UNICEF team members. The activities included signing workplans for 2022 with fourteen Government partners, joining the #GoBlue campaign by illuminating “Berkarar” shopping and entertainment center in blue, projecting UNICEF anniversary logo on public screens across the country, and participation of Turkmenistan in inaugural Global Forum for Children and Youth (CY21), where a young SDG Ambassador and climate activist from Turkmenistan spoke about the successful experience of the country on integrating the climate change into primary and secondary education curriculum and strengthening the resilience of the youth in Turkmenistan towards the climate change impacts. The series of innovative and high visibility events placed UNICEF in the spotlight on its anniversary, providing wide coverage in the traditional and social media about UNICEF history, mandate, and programmes in Turkmenistan and globally.