

Uruguay

Update on the context and situation of children

The health situation related to COVID-19 worsened in 2021. Infection figures, which had been under control until November 2020, then began to reach more than 100 cases per day. From that point on, the numbers of both confirmed cases and deaths from COVID-19 began to increase rapidly.

On 1 March 2021, when in-person classes resumed, the average weekly caseload was 21.6 per 100,000 inhabitants, the second highest in the world at the time. From the beginning of May to 15 June, Uruguay was among the three countries in the world with the highest number of deaths as a proportion of its population.

Uruguay also began COVID-19 vaccinations on 1 March 2021. Workers in the health and education systems were among the first to be vaccinated. Vaccination was rapidly extended to all adults, and in June was extended to adolescents aged 12–17. That month, vaccination was authorized for migrants and asylum-seekers who did not yet have Uruguayan papers.

In August 2021, the ratio of weekly deaths to the number of inhabitants had returned to pre-November 2020 levels (less than one death per million). On 20 November 2021, 75 per cent of the population had received both doses of the vaccine, and 37 per cent had received a booster dose. Seventy-nine per cent of adolescents aged 12–14 and 82 per cent of adolescents aged 15–19 were double vaccinated.[1] Children aged 5–11 will also be vaccinated in 2022.

As in the rest of the world, the pandemic has had a negative effect on economic activity in Uruguay. In 2020, gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 5.9 per cent; only in the second quarter of 2021 did it rebound by 11 per cent on the previous year. However, economic activity in April to June was still 2.8 per cent below pre-COVID levels. The employment rate for men returned to pre-COVID levels as early as November 2020, but not until September 2021 for women.

The government expanded the scope of its social protection policies. However, monetary poverty rose from 8.8 per cent in 2019 to 11.6 per cent in 2020, returning to levels not seen since 2013. Child poverty stood at 20.2 per cent (4 percentage points higher than in 2019). Moreover, in 2020, a child aged 0–5 was nine times more likely to live in a household living below the poverty line than a person over 65. In the first half of 2021, the poverty rate fell to 10.2 per cent of the whole population and 17.8 per cent among children and adolescents. However, it is still early in the recovery process, and this improvement will have to be confirmed with additional data.

Geographically, the highest levels of poverty continue to be observed in Montevideo (an average of 24 per cent between 2018 and 2020), approaching 40 per cent in some areas. The departments with the next-highest rates of child poverty, at 20 per cent or higher, are on the border with Brazil. In some of the border departments, this situation was compounded by the arrival of migrants by land, with a higher proportion of families with children and in poorer health.[2] UNICEF decided to start work in Rivera and Rocha, the departments where the main entry points for migrants are located.

As usual, school classes began on 1 March 2021, with 87 per cent of schools ready to receive all students.[3] However, due to the deteriorating health situation, the government suspended classes from 23 March. Unlike in 2020, the education authorities stated that virtual education would be compulsory. There was a gradual return to in-person attendance from 3 May to 19 July.

Data for 2021 are not yet available to assess educational outcomes related to access. Initial reports on

the 2020 results show that the gap in online school participation between different socioeconomic levels widened. Although Plan Ceibal puts Uruguay at an advantage compared with other countries, the frequency of access to the platforms depended on socioeconomic status (24.5 times in the most disadvantaged quintile compared with 73.5 times in the highest quintile). Together with Plan Ceibal, UNICEF is assessing the causes of these inequalities. This assessment will include recommendations and lessons learned that will be useful for other countries in the region.[4]

The second UNICEF/UN Women time use, children and gender survey[5] found that the number of hours children spent outside the home had not yet fully recovered by July 2021. In particular, adolescents still spent most of their time at home, which raises concerns for their mental health. Uruguay has had a very high suicide rate among adolescents and young people for several years. In 2020, there were 22.4 deaths by suicide per 100,000 people aged 15–24, while the average for the region was 8.4 (latest available data from 2019).[6] UNICEF is providing technical support to the *Instituto Nacional de la Juventud* (National Youth Institute) in the development of its mental health strategy. In addition, this year UNICEF carried out the ‘*Adolescentes, no están perdidos*’ (‘Adolescents: they are not lost’) campaign, which sought to raise society’s awareness about the characteristics of adolescence, foster empathy around their needs at this stage of life, and provide tools for adults to guide them.

In summary, compared with other countries in the region, Uruguay has proved to be prepared for a humanitarian situation on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its health system never collapsed, and it has a resilient social protection system. However, mitigating the impact on children and adolescents will remain on the agenda in the coming years, and UNICEF will be adding its contribution.

[1] <https://monitor.uruguaysevacuna.gub.uy/>

[2] <https://www.unicef.org/uruguay/historias/ninos-ninas-y-adolescentes-migrantes-en-rivera-y-rocha>

[3] <https://presidencia.gub.uy/comunicacion/comunicacionnoticias/robert-silva-anep-comienzo-clases>

[4] <https://www.gub.uy/presidencia/comunicacion/noticias/plan-ceibal-unicef-lanzan-proyecto-para-educacion-inclusiva-calidad>

[5] <https://www.unicef.org/uruguay/informes/segunda-encuesta-ninez-uso-del-tiempo-genero>

[6] <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mental-health/suicide-rates>

Major contributions and drivers of results

The new Cooperation Programme 2021–2025 began in 2021. As its major goals, the programme envisages that, by 2025, social norms regarding gender roles and violence against children, adolescents and women will increasingly be transformed; the most vulnerable children and adolescents will increasingly benefit from inclusive, multisectoral quality services; and children’s and adolescents’ rights will be higher on the public and political agenda.

In 2021, the United Nations System also presented the 2021–2025 United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), structured around four strategic priorities. UNICEF participates in three of them and leads the working group in charge of the third priority: “developing *public policies* that ensure quality education, social protection and health for all people”. The joint workplans under the framework were presented to government authorities in November 2021.

Both UNICEF programming and the activities included in the UNSDCF combine actions to respond to the COVID-19 humanitarian emergency with a medium-term vision related to recovering from its effects and a longer-term vision for the country’s development, guided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Adolescents were both greatly affected and had their behaviour questioned during the pandemic. UNICEF sought to generate empathy in adults and support for adolescents, contributing to SDGs 3, 4 and 13/UNSDCF Goals 2.1, 3.1 and 3.2/Strategic Plan Goal Area 5

Throughout the pandemic, adolescents' behaviour was sometimes questioned because adults perceived lower levels of compliance with COVID-19 preventive measures. Moreover, adolescents experienced a longer lockdown period than children, since they returned to in-person classes later. In response, UNICEF paid greater attention to adolescents in 2021, with initiatives aimed at raising awareness in society, providing tools for adolescents and encouraging their participation.

UNICEF launched the campaign '*Adolescentes, no están perdidos*', which sought to generate empathy for adolescents' needs and provide tools to enable adults to guide them. The campaign had a multimedia content strategy: audiovisual adverts, a website, eight digital guides, video clips with guidance from experts, and four podcasts on the issues of greatest concern for families. The materials have been downloaded almost 10,000 times. A press strategy was also implemented alongside the advertising strategy, with more than 40 stories appearing on the main national television, radio and print media.

UNICEF also launched a strategy targeting adolescents – to provide them with information to prevent educational disengagement and support their mental health – through the *Derechos del Estudiante* (Student Rights) portal, an initiative run by the Administración Nacional de Educación Pública (National Public Education Administration – ANEP) and UNICEF since 2018. UNICEF created messages about remote learning, hybrid education, the gradual return to face-to-face education, and self-care. In four weeks, there was 390 per cent growth in the number of visits to the portal compared with the same period in 2020.

UNICEF carried out several initiatives aimed at adolescents and young people throughout the country. '*Jóvenes a todo cambio*' ('Youth for Change'), a joint initiative with the Instituto Nacional de la Juventud (National Youth Institute), targeted adolescents and young people aged 14–29 years in Uruguay. It sought to promote their capacity for agency and their role as strategic stakeholders in promoting initiatives at the territorial level. In the third edition of the '*Sumá tu voz*' ('Add your Voice') programme, 50 teenagers from across the country were brought together around the theme of '*Reimaginar la Educación*' ('Reimagining Education') in the post-pandemic context, so that the stakeholders who are part of the education ecosystem could hear their opinions and use them to rethink the education system of the future. Together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Ministry of the Environment, 185 adolescents joined the virtual event '*Tu mirada importa*' ('Your View Matters') to include their voice in the framework of the Climate Promise, a UNDP-led project present in more than 100 countries around the world, which surveys opinions and expectations about the environment and climate change.

The pandemic increased the visibility of mental health issues in children and adolescents, and these issues will be a central part of UNICEF work in 2022, contributing to SDGs 3 and 16/UNSDCF Goals 3.2 and 4.2/Strategic Plan Goal Areas 2, 3 and 5

The fear, uncertainty and isolation caused by the pandemic revealed mental health issues in the population. Adults' concern for the mental health of children and adolescents emerged spontaneously in various studies carried out by UNICEF, such as the report on the experience of education during the pandemic and research in municipality D in Montevideo (both reports are currently being edited for publication). UNICEF is also supporting the National Youth Institute in its mental health strategy for adolescents and young people, which will include a mass communication campaign to put the issue on the national public agenda.

UNICEF also helped make the situation of children in mental health clinics more visible by publishing a report produced under an agreement with the Institución Nacional de Derechos Humanos (National Human Rights Institution). The research produced extremely worrying data about the children's extended stays in psychiatric clinics, mistreatment and a lack of contact with their families, among other issues. The presentation of the report was attended by the Vice-President of Uruguay. The report led to the establishment of a working agreement with the Instituto del Niño y Adolescente del Uruguay (Uruguayan Institute for Children and Adolescents – INAU) on research into the institutional pathways of children and adolescents who enter mental health clinics. The aim is to transform institutional practices that result in long stays, and to develop training for the staff of 24-hour care centres, to be implemented in early 2022.

Uruguay performed very well in remote education and will serve as an example to other countries, but it is necessary to increase efforts so that all children and adolescents can take advantage of this opportunity, contributing to SDGs 4 and 10/UNSDCF Goal 3.1/Strategic Plan Goal Areas 2 and 5

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an educational crisis that affected the engagement of children and adolescents in education. Uruguay stood out as one of the best-prepared countries for remote learning, due to high levels of connectivity and the prior development of Plan Ceibal (one laptop per child). In this context, UNICEF helped with strategies to reach the most vulnerable children, drew lessons from the pandemic to improve the education system in the future, and increased efforts to export the Plan Ceibal model.

In terms of strategies, UNICEF supported ANEP in implementing a socio-educational intervention model called '*ReVuelta Educativa*' ('Educational Return') targeting secondary school dropouts. It is being tested in four María Espinola schools in Rivera and Montevideo. Furthermore, UNICEF supported training to teach in virtual environments for 300 teachers and future teachers, to promote practices that integrate technology in the classroom. UNICEF also supported the development of an inclusive education module for teachers.

To learn lessons from the pandemic, UNICEF, ANEP and Plan Ceibal conducted a study to systematize teaching practices in public education in Uruguay. In addition, UNICEF and UN Women conducted their second survey on children, gender and time use, which again showed the unequal division of unpaid labour between men and women in the household and confirmed the need to work towards changing social norms. The survey examined in depth the educational situation of children and adolescents during the pandemic and was complemented with a qualitative study with families of vulnerable children about their experience with online education. UNICEF also promoted the 'Reimagining Education' project, placing adolescents at the centre of the process and working with various stakeholders to jointly design tomorrow's education. This project includes consultations with adolescents and co-design workshops with adolescents, stakeholders and international experts. With these studies and activities, UNICEF aims to provide inputs into the process of educational change.

Moreover, through funding set aside by the UNICEF Headquarters Office of Innovation for innovative programming, UNICEF financed and supported Plan Ceibal to develop its 'Digital Bridges for Educational Equity' project. The project will allow two outcomes to be achieved: expanding the scope of Plan Ceibal at the general level to reach the most vulnerable students; and producing systematized tools from the Plan Ceibal model that will enable the initiative to be replicated in other countries in the region that require it. Within the framework of this project, a delegation led by the Minister of Education of El Salvador visited the country in December 2021.

UNICEF supported care systems for children in early childhood and their families, contributing to SDGs 1, 2, 3, 10 and 16/UNSDCF Goals 3.2 and 4.2/Strategic Plan Goal Areas 1 and 5

UNICEF continued to support the municipality of Canelones with a model that includes a cash transfer (provided by the local government) and a WhatsApp messaging service to provide information on health, nutrition (breastfeeding, introduction of complementary feeding, and healthy eating), parenting, care and social protection to 2,800 families with children up to four years old. In addition, a telephone advice and consultation service was provided as a parenting support tool to 300 of the families assessed as the most vulnerable. For a group of 100 families, the municipality applied an instrument provided by UNICEF to detect situations of risk and violence. UNICEF systematized the experience.

Using the materials and lessons learned from the project with the municipality of Canelones, UNICEF is supporting the Ministry of Social Development's '*Uruguay Crece Contigo*' ('Uruguay Grows with You') programme to establish a national telecare model for families in vulnerable situation. In addition, UNICEF backed the development of activities to support the emotional and mental health of all professionals working in direct care.

UNICEF is also supporting INAU, which is responsible for supervising all early childhood education centres, to review and identify comprehensive child development assessment tools. Within this framework, UNICEF developed two self-administered virtual courses, which will be available in March 2022.

In 2021, UNICEF also worked with the Administración de Servicios de Salud del Estado (State Health Services Administration – ASSE) on defining care protocols for child developmental disorders, which will be available in 2022 and will be used in the 11 early childhood care units in the country. ASSE is the largest health-care provider in Uruguay, serving 310,000 children and adolescents across the country. UNICEF also developed a pack of materials to support the application of the *Guide to Monitoring the Development of Children under 5 Years of Age* (developed by the Ministry of Public Health in 2019 with support from UNICEF). It distributed 900 packs, including to all primary health-care clinics, which serve all children under five years of age covered by ASSE.

UNICEF contributed to highlighting the link between gender-based violence and violence against children, with the aim of generating an integrated response from the State and contributing to SDGs 5 and 16/UNSDCF Goals 4.1 and 4.2/Strategic Plan Goal Areas 1, 3 and 5

One of the new features of the 2021–2025 Cooperation Programme is UNICEF's intention to link organizations, policies and programmes focused on gender-based violence with those focused on violence against children, to ensure comprehensive care for all victims. The strategy to achieve this includes advocacy, evidence and the creation of a care model for the children of women survivors of violence, in conjunction with other agencies in the system. This is the first pilot programme linking the response to VAW-VAC implemented in the region

On the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, UNICEF, the Sistema Integral de Protección a la Infancia y a la Adolescencia contra la Violencia (Comprehensive System for the Protection of Children and Adolescents against Violence – SIPIAV) and the National Women's Institute presented two joint studies: an analysis of the survey on gender-based violence and childhood that estimates the number of children exposed to violence against women, and a study on orphans of femicide that reconstructs the pathways of these children and the difficulties in public policy responses. In addition to diagnosing the problems within women's and children's care programmes, the two studies were used as the basis for creating a care model for children of women victims of violence in Montevideo, in conjunction with the Municipality of Montevideo and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The service was launched in October 2021 and is being systematized by

the regional offices of both agencies.

UNICEF, UNFPA and UN Women produced two episodes of a television programme to raise awareness about the impact of gender-based violence on children and violence against women and girls in public spaces. The programmes aired on one of the main television channels.

UNICEF and UNFPA are developing an analysis of the national response to situations of sexual exploitation, to propose improvements. UNICEF and the civil society organization *Gurises Unidos* (Children United) launched the ‘Protective Environments against Sexual Exploitation’ project in the city of Chuy, on the border with Brazil. The project aims to build an inter-institutional protection network (comprising, among others, the Ministry of Social Development, INAU, ASSE, the judiciary and the police) to prevent and respond to situations of sexual exploitation. UNICEF is also supporting the Ministry of Tourism and INAU to develop activities to prevent sexual exploitation in tourist areas.

UNICEF’s first activities on the ground focused on improving the response to migrant families with children on the border with Brazil, contributing to SDGs 1, 2, 3 and 10/UNSDCF Goals 4.2 and 4.3/Strategic Plan Goal Areas 1, 3 and 5

The new Cooperation Programme focuses on work at local level, in line with the government initiative to increase decentralization of social policies. The departments prioritized by UNICEF are those on the border with Brazil.

The first interventions carried out by UNICEF sought to improve the humanitarian situation of migrant families with children in Rivera and Chuy. In close coordination with national partners, this included assistance with temporary housing and the design of strategies, together with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to provide psychosocial assistance to migrant families with children. UNICEF is also supporting the migrant shelter at the Chuy border with Brazil.

In Rivera, UNICEF is working with the Ministry of Social Development to create the ‘Casa Trampolín’ (‘Springboard House’) to respond to migrant families in situations of extreme vulnerability. This project will provide accommodation and help migrant children and their families access social benefits, documentation, education and health services.

Thanks to the generosity of donors in Uruguay and the innovativeness of the fundraising team, the number of donors continued to grow, contributing to SDG 17

Despite the challenging environment created by the pandemic’s negative effects on the economy and employment, the number of donors rose to 123,000 (4.4 per cent of the country’s adult population). This meant that Uruguay remained the second-largest donor country in relation to its population, with the third-largest absolute number of donors in the region (after Argentina and Brazil). These numbers confirm the generosity of Uruguayan society and the importance it places on children’s welfare.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Multi-Partner Trust Fund

Within the framework of the United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund, UNICEF is part of the joint project ‘Strengthening a gendered and generational socioeconomic response through evidence-based policy advocacy and analyses’ together with UNFPA, UNDP and UN Women.

UNICEF is performing tasks such as supporting the State to develop a model to re-engage adolescents in educational centres in Rivera and the outskirts of Montevideo; supporting the ‘cash plus’ model of the Municipality of Canelones; and extending its support to a national telecare model for the Ministry of Social Development; and providing technical assistance to help the National Institute of Statistics develop an official measurement of multidimensional poverty.

SDG Fund

UNICEF is participating in Window 1 of the Joint SDG Fund project together with UNDP, UN Women, IOM and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). The project aims to increase the private sector’s contribution to achieving the SDGs by 2030. UNICEF is committed to developing educational models that empower the most vulnerable adolescents.

Gender-based violence and violence against children

UNICEF and UNFPA are working with the Municipality of Montevideo on a care model for the children of women victims of violence. UNICEF and UNFPA are supporting the national response to situations of child sexual exploitation. Both agencies and the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) will carry out an assessment of the response to situations of exploitation. This will allow the main critical points to be identified and improvements to public policies to be proposed.

Response to migrants

UNICEF is working with IOM and UNHCR on the response to the migrant population in border areas, and supporting the Ministry of Social Development, among others. The agencies are coordinating the strengthening of the migrant shelter and psychosocial support at the Chuy border with Brazil. The three agencies plan to open an inter-agency office and support another centre for migrant families with children at the Rivera border with Brazil.

In Montevideo, UNICEF and IOM are working on humanitarian assistance, housing and psychosocial support for migrant families with children. The process is being systematized by UNICEF as an advocacy and awareness-raising tool.

Back to school

With school starting again in 2021, the education authorities, UNICEF, PAHO, UNESCO and UNFPA joined forces to raise awareness among families about the importance of getting children back to school. With this aim in mind, they launched the #CadaDíaCuenta (#EveryDayCounts) campaign, which reassured families about the steps that schools were implementing in the context of the health crisis and stressed the value of education.

Evidence generation

In conjunction with UN Women, UNICEF conducted the second time use, children and gender survey. One of its main findings was that adolescents had the longest lockdown of all age groups. Moreover, UNICEF collaborated with IOM on the fourth round of the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) study in Uruguay to learn about the situation of the migrant population on the border with Brazil.

Redefining the strategy for working with subnational governments

The country programme that began in March 2021 includes a special focus on developing work strategies at local level, particularly on the outskirts of Montevideo and in departments on the border with Brazil. These places are home to the most vulnerable children in Uruguay. For example, child poverty reached 26 per cent in Rivera in 2020, while in some neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Montevideo it exceeded 40 per cent. The worsening health situation in 2021, as described in the first part of this document, had an impact on the lives of children and adolescents across the country; its medium- and long-term effects are yet to be seen. Moreover, in the departments that have a land border with Brazil, both irregular migration and difficulties for migrants to access formal jobs and housing increased, as reflected in the DTM study.

Activities on the ground are very important in terms of bringing UNICEF closer to situations in which there are very vulnerable children and also in developing scalable intervention models. At the same time as it began working to assist migrant families with children in partnership with IOM and UNHCR in cities on the border with Brazil, such as Rivera and Chuy, UNICEF agreed on strategic entry-points to initiate support for local institutions responsible for children. In the coming years, UNICEF will focus its work on these territories, with the aim of including children's perspectives in the municipalities' programmes. This will have two main components: training both local and national government officials in the rights of children's and adolescents' rights; and strengthening strategic planning and results-based management skills to improve the efficiency of existing inter-institutional spaces and fulfil plans for children and adolescents at the territorial level. It will also continue its work to support institutions responsible for receiving migrants with children and to prevent violence and sexual exploitation.

Focus on the most vulnerable children: A bridge between humanitarian and development work

Uruguay, a high-income country, has a strong health and social protection system with broad coverage that enabled it to respond to the shock of COVID-19 and be resilient to the pandemic. By increasing cash transfers, extending unemployment insurance, and having a public health system able to deal with the health impact, Uruguay has demonstrated that its system is robust enough to respond to a major humanitarian emergency. However, the impact of the measures on children and adolescents, especially the closure of primary and secondary schools (although of very short duration), had consequences for mental health and learning, just as in the rest of the world.

UNICEF had the space to develop and support several initiatives aimed at improving the situation of the most vulnerable children, which will continue. For example, together with the National Public Education Administration, UNICEF is implementing a school re-engagement model in Rivera and the outskirts of Montevideo to bring adolescents back to school. It also produced evidence on migrant children, children without parental care, and adolescent education and mental health, which will be key to reorienting state and societal support for recovery efforts. To guide future work, UNICEF began supporting the National Institute of Statistics to construct a multidimensional poverty line that reflects the individualized material deprivation of children, and to integrate administrative data into its statistics. UNICEF was also involved in strengthening the capacities of the early childhood care programmes of the Ministry of Social Development and the Municipality of Canelones that began in the wake of the pandemic but will be an integral part of long-term early childhood strategies.

In 2021 UNICEF finished the evaluations of three initiatives, that provided valuable lessons for the programme. The evaluation of the intervention model for non-custodial sanctions for adolescents showed that the model is useful but there is a need to improve its coordination and to train technical personnel in its execution. The evaluation of the inclusive schools' network (known as 'Mandela network') showed the need for better data on children with disabilities and will be used to advocate for a inclusive education national plan. Finally, the evaluation of the effectiveness of food education

materials on families' attitudes and behaviours captured families' perceptions on complementary feeding, useful to update nutritional guidelines for early childhood in Uruguay.

Uruguay has the potential to be an example to the world

As a high-income country with strong democratic institutions and a small population, Uruguay could showcase experiences that could be useful to the rest of the world. In particular, due to the country's high levels of connectivity, Plan Ceibal and its coordination of the National Public Education Administration and the Ministry of Education and Culture, Uruguay has been a global example in the provision of digital and distance education. However, not all children are in a position to use digital platforms. In 2021, UNICEF secured funding from the Office of Innovation to address both of these challenges. On the one hand, Plan Ceibal will have the tools to ensure digital education reaches all children in the country; on the other hand, it will systematize the experience within models that will be easily exportable to other countries in the region.

The scope of this education project is remarkable, but the country undoubtedly has more experiences to show the world. The telecare model for families with young children, initiated by UNICEF with the Municipality of Canelones and now expanded through the Ministry of Social Development, will be one of the examples to follow closely in 2022. Supporting the Ministry of Defense to enable Uruguayan peacekeepers to be champions of child protection in United Nations peacekeeping operations and Uruguay's Peace Operations Training Institute to become a regional hub for child protection training is another example of where Uruguay is a standard-bearer for children's rights.