

West and Central Africa

Update on the context and trends

Since the turn of the century, with the pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals and subsequently the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the West and Central Africa region (WCAR) has achieved significant progress for children. Thus, for example, the rate of under-five mortality in WCAR fell from 168 per thousand live births in 2000, to 105 in 2015 and 91 in 2020.

Despite this progress, children in WCAR still bear a disproportionate share of the global burden of child rights deprivations. Whereas the region is home to only 12% of the world's children, it accounts for over one-third of under-five deaths, one-third of children under-vaccinated for DTP3, one-third of out-of-school children (primary and lower secondary school-age) and one-fifth of stunted children. Of the ten countries characterized by the highest prevalence of child marriage, seven are found in WCAR, including the top four.

In 2021, UNICEF redoubled efforts to accompany WCAR countries to restore more resilient child-centered social services and galvanize acceleration towards the SDGs by 2030, in the midst of the enduring effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economic Trends

- **Economic growth improved in 2021 after a sharp drop following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic**, reaching the level achieved in 2019. The GDP growth forecast for 2021 was 3.69% (4.45% West Africa, 1.98% Central Africa), up from -0.82% in 2020, according to the IMF. Still, positive growth masked significant inequities.
- **However, the economic recovery of 2021 was not sufficient to overcome the revenue drop in 2020**. Consequently, social sector expenditure could not recuperate the losses related to child health, nutrition, education, protection and water, sanitation and hygiene.
- **Debt servicing in many countries was unsustainably high and expected to further increase**, with the effect of crowding out government expenditure on other sectors, notably the social sectors. National debt represented over 80% of GDP in several countries and was further increased by higher than planned interest payments in foreign currencies due to currency fluctuations.

Humanitarian Trends

- **Over 58 million children were in need of humanitarian assistance in the region**, to which UNICEF responded alongside humanitarian partners through 14 Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) appeals in 2021. This represented fewer children in need than in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-2020 (65 million) but was still more than double the number before the pandemic (25 million).
- Humanitarian situations affecting children worsened, particularly in the **Central Sahel** (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), countries in the **Lake Chad Basin** (Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria), the **Central African Republic** and the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**, due to the combined effects of overlapping armed conflict, extreme poverty, food insecurity and climate change, as well as the socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and other recurrent epidemics such as cholera, Ebola, measles, polio and yellow fever. Insecurity mounted as non-state armed groups expanded their activities, particularly in the Lake

Chad Basin and the Central Sahel, the latter resulting in increased instances of conflict spill-over into neighbouring coastal countries, particularly Benin and Côte d'Ivoire.

- In the DRC (11.5 million children in need) two **Ebola outbreaks** occurred in North Kivu – an active conflict zone – while Guinea experienced its first Ebola outbreak since the 2014-2016 West Africa outbreak. All three outbreaks were declared over by year's end.
- The institutional **fragility** of WCAR countries – exacerbating the effects of emergencies on the most vulnerable children – was brought to the fore with armed forces assuming power in Chad, Mali and Guinea in 2021, and in Burkina Faso in January 2022.

Demographic Trends

- **The expansion of service coverage and the adoption of behaviours and social norms favourable to children have been outpaced by population growth.** Thus, the proportion of stunted children under age 5 decreased from 41.1% in 2000 to 33.9% in 2017 and 32.5% in 2020, whereas the number of stunted children rose by 6.5 million, from 22.8 million to 29.3 million, during the same period.
- By the final year of the African Union Agenda 2063, **the number of children under 18 years of age in WCAR is set to double** compared to 2015, reaching over 500 million, such that WCAR will be home to 1 in 5 of the world's children.
- **The urbanization rate in WCAR continued to rise**, creating risks and opportunities for children. Whereas approximately 41% Africa's population lived in cities in 2017, it is expected that by 2050 this proportion will rise to over 60%.
- **Gender discrimination continues to infringe the rights of women and girls** across the region through formal and informal laws, attitudes and practices at all levels of society, undermining their agency and compromising their physical integrity, access to justice and enjoyment of productive and financial resources and opportunities. According to the 2022 SDG Gender Index, 17 WCAR countries (those for which data is available) show very poor achievements regarding gender equality across the 14 SDGs covered by the index. Nevertheless, 12 WCAR countries have made some progress towards gender equality between 2015 and 2020, of which 2 (Benin and Senegal) stood among the top 10 most significantly improved countries globally.

Environmental Trends

- **WCAR is highly susceptible to the increasingly adverse effects of climate change**, which are expected to exacerbate heat wave conditions, water scarcity, drought and desertification, erratic rainfall patterns, flooding and coastal erosion. These in turn can have negative socioeconomic effects and fuel armed conflicts, notably in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, affecting the most vulnerable children first and foremost.
- **7 of the 10 countries most affected by climate change are in WCAR**, according to the UNICEF Children Climate Risk Index.
- At the same time, **the region is rich in solar and hydraulic resources**, available for green initiatives, representing an opportunity for the region's vast and vibrant young population.

Major contributions and drivers of results

During the final year of the Regional Office Management Plan (ROMP) 2018-2021, WCARO supported the Regional Management Team (RMT) to pursue its focus on the Key Results for Children (KRC) as the region's strategic contribution to the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2018-2021 and therefore to

the SDGs and the African Union Agenda 2063, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The KRCs are embedded in UNICEF Country Programmes, in support of UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCF) and national development priorities.

During the period 2018 to 2021, progress was made in influencing impact-level results in favour of child rights across the region, though acceleration is required to meet the ambitions of the SDGs by 2030:

- Key successes were the reduction in the **prevalence of child marriage** (KRC 6), meeting the target, and a significant increase in **birth registration coverage** (KRC 7), exceeding the initial target, though falling short of the revised target set at mid-term to reflect the ambition of the RMT to pursue universal coverage.
- Slight improvements were observed in reducing the **prevalence of open defecation** (KRC 8), increasing **access to education** (KRC 3) and **improving learning outcomes** (KRC 4), however the cautious pace of progress meant that targets remained far out of reach.
- In the case of **stunting** (KRC 2), prevalence continued on a steady downward trend, but was outpaced by population growth, such that the number of stunted children continued to rise.
- The **coverage of DTP3 vaccination** (KRC 1) regressed slightly and the **prevalence of sexual violence** (KRC 5) grew.

Goal Area 1: Every Child Survives and Thrives (KRCs 1 and 2)

KRC 1 seeks, by 2021, for 80% (15.4 million) of children 0-11 months in WCAR to be protected against vaccine-preventable diseases annually. The percentage of children under one year who received the third dose of DTP vaccine decreased slightly from 66% in 2017 to 65% in 2020, while the number of under-vaccinated children increased from 6.1 million to 6.6 million (WUENIC). The KRC 1 target was not met. Key bottlenecks include domestic funding, suboptimal management of vaccine and cold chain equipment, limited public information and community engagement and a lack of tailored strategies for hard-to-reach and unimmunized children.

KRC 2 seeks, by 2021, for 93% (86 million) girls and boys under 5 years in WCAR to receive high impact nutrition services to prevent stunting. The number of children aged 6-59 months reached with two doses of vitamin A supplements annually rebounded to 54 million in 2021 (65% of the target population) after a sharp drop to 20 million in 2020 with the effects of the pandemic, up slightly from 52 million in 2016 (Nutridash). The KRC 2 target was partially met.

WCARO supported COs to contribute to the continuity of routine immunization and its resumption in cases of service disruptions, with the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. WCARO supported 19 countries in the implementation of the Cold Chain Equipment Optimization Platform, which involves upgrading equipment in a sustainable and efficient manner, including through the use of solar power and the engagement of local suppliers.

With WHO, the RO co-led the WCAR Risk Communication and Community Engagement regional interagency group, with a non-exclusive focus on immunization demand generation. 7 COs benefited from RCCE support to make use of evidence on social and behavioural drivers for immunization, including voice response surveys and U-Report polls reaching over 220,000 people.

Early in the year, WCARO supported countries to ramp up COVID-19 vaccine supplies by supporting the development of National Deployment and Vaccination Plans and conducting joint field missions with WHO to 9 countries. The RO supported WCAR countries to procure US\$ 341 million worth of supplies, including COVID-19 vaccines, personal protective equipment and oxygen therapy equipment.

Although vaccine supplies increased significantly in the second half of the year, countries then faced significant challenges in implementing vaccination campaigns, due to suboptimal vaccination strategies and limited funding, and in fostering vaccine uptake among populations, due to prevalent rumors and misinformation. Of the 104.5 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines delivered to WCAR countries during the reporting year, 46% were administered.

To help countries to overcome these challenges, the RO supported the strengthening of country vaccine planning, logistics and cold chains. To better understand and address vaccine reluctance among populations, the RO developed 10 social media monitor reports on COVID-19 vaccine perception trends. By year's end, 3.3% of the total population in the region was fully vaccinated against COVID-19, and coverage nearly doubled by the end of the first quarter of 2022, reaching 6.4%.

WCARO equally emphasized support to COs to halt the transmission of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2). As part of the Rapid Response Team, the RO deployed timely technical assistance to 12 countries that conducted 38 rounds of polio vaccination campaigns. This contributed to a significant reduction in the number of cases across the region (75% decrease to 155 cases), with the exception of Nigeria, where the number of cases rose significantly to 721, accounting for four-fifths of cases in the region in 2021.

WCARO's leadership of *Stronger with Breastmilk Only* – a public advocacy and social and behavior change initiative, in collaboration with Alive & Thrive and WHO – was sustained, involving 19 countries. An e-learning platform was developed to contribute to strengthening country capacities, focusing on breastfeeding, with a first cohort of 5 countries.

UNICEF leadership of the interagency Regional Nutrition Working Group sought to shape the regional nutrition agenda and amplify advocacy in favour of the prevention of all forms of malnutrition. For example, the Group served to mobilize regional partners to support governments to formulate commitments, presented at the *Nutrition for Growth* summit.

With RO support, 3 countries benefited from the Nutrition Match Fund mechanism, whereby governments are incentivized to allocate national budgets toward the procurement of ready-to-use therapeutic food – a key strategy for the sustainability of wasting treatment – to the order of US\$ 2.5 million matched funds.

Goal Area 2: Every Child Learns (KRCs 3 and 4)

KRC 3 seeks, by 2021, for the proportion of out-of-school children (OOSC) of primary and lower secondary school age in WCAR to be reduced from 34% (41 million) to 20% (29 million). The most recent household surveys suggest a steady reduction in the regional OOSC rate, reaching an estimated 29% (39 million) in 2021. Although schools reopened after closures in 2020, which averaged 15 weeks in the region, it is expected that future surveys will reveal a significant number of children who did not return to school. The KRC 3 target was partially met.

KRC 4 seeks, by 2021, for 100% (76 million) of pupils from pre-primary to lower secondary education in WCAR, to be reached with interventions aimed at the improvement of learning outcomes and skills. All of the 12 WCAR countries subject to the most recent Education Systems Analysis (PASEC) exhibited a greater proportion of students meeting the minimum proficiency threshold in reading and mathematics in grades 2-3 and/or grade 6 (both, in most countries), compared to 2014. However, over two-thirds of children still did not meet the minimum proficiency threshold in 10 countries, indicative of a learning crisis.

WCARO developed and used knowledge products to promote policies in favour of equitable and inclusive education access among governments and partners. With RO support, the findings of 19 national studies on OOSC were synthesized and 60 OOSC interventions from 15 countries were classified by level of maturity, of which some were preselected for future case studies. Four countries collaborated with the RO to define costed, multi-sectoral packages of interventions promoting the completion of secondary education among adolescent girls, based on which RO led the publication a regional investment case.

To address the learning crisis, WCARO pursued a multifaceted approach involving: early childhood education, foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), innovations in digital learning, learning assessments and continuity of learning in response to COVID-19 disruptions.

With RO support, 16 countries pursued evidence-based innovations focused on FLN skills in the early primary years, of which 3 countries made significant progress during the reporting year by piloting formative assessments and implementing the 'teaching at the right level' approach. The RO supported all 24 countries to rapidly develop COVID-19 Education Response Plans, thanks to timely financial support from the Global Partnership for Education.

UNICEF and ITU collaborated to support the Reimagine Education initiative and the GIGA initiative to connect schools to the internet in 8 countries, to facilitate digital learning as a complement to face-to-face learning through blended approaches.

Goal Area 3: Every Child is Protected from Violence and Exploitation (KRCs 5, 6 and 7)

KRC 5 seeks, by 2021, for the percentage of women aged 18 to 29 who have experienced sexual violence by age 18 to be reduced from 6% in 2017 to 4% by 2021. The most recent household surveys indicate that the prevalence of sexual violence rose to 7.4% in 2021. The KRC 5 target was not met. Key bottlenecks include the under-resourced social service workforce, social and gender norms leading to a culture of silence and stigmatization of survivors of sexual violence, and insufficient violence prevention, response services, child protection case management and information management systems.

KRC 6 seeks, by 2021, for the percentage of girls in WCAR aged 20 to 24, married before the age of 18, to be reduced from 41% to 37%. Household surveys indicate that the prevalence of child marriage among women currently within this age group (for countries with available data) continued to decrease, reaching 37%. However, regional prevalence remains at 39% if women who were within the age group at the time of the most recent surveys are considered. The KRC 6 target was met.

KRC 7 seeks, by 2021, for the percentage of children under one year of age, whose birth is registered at the civil registry, to be raised from 44% in 2017 to 68% (increased from the initial target of 53% at mid-term). The most recent household surveys suggest a significant increase in coverage of birth registration services, reaching 64% in 2021. The KRC 7 target, revised at mid-term, was partially met, while the initial target was exceeded.

Emphasizing systems strengthening, with RO support, 5 additional countries (10 total) fully or partially rolled out the Primero child protection information management system (CPIMS+) in 2021, thereby enhancing case management and information management systems.

High-level partnership and advocacy with ECOWAS contributed to the adoption in 2021 of the ECOWAS Regional Strategy for Preventing and Responding to Sexual and Gender-based Violence and the Elimination of all Violence against Women and Girls.

WCARO provided technical support and training to 8 COs for the timely verification, monitoring and

reporting on grave violations of child rights (including sexual violence), which are on the rise in WCAR, having increased by one-third from 2019 to 2020. The UNICEF Regional Director raised the profile of children in armed conflict on the regional political agenda, through her briefing to the African Union Peace and Security Council, following which the Council issued a statement referring to the need for more engagement on this issue at the highest levels.

To strengthen political commitment to reduce child marriage, the RO actively engaged in the 3rd African Girls' Summit, co-convened by the African Union (AU) and the Government of Niger, including a Pre-Summit Youth Event and First Ladies' Side Event.

Seeking to foster strong public dialogue and action, WCARO led the production of *Vaillante*, a culture-sensitive series on child marriage, in collaboration with the 3 Central Sahel COs. The series, promotional materials and social media marketing reached close to 17 million people, obtained 1.6 million engagements (likes, shares and comments), and was viewed nearly 50,000 times.

With RO support, 16 countries took measures to render civil registry services interoperable with health systems – a critical condition for decentralization and acceleration. However, further effort is needed to shift from modelling to scale. To address this, the RO supported advocacy for simplified business processes, including delegation of authority to allow health officials to formally take part in the registration process, as well as for the alignment of national legislation with international standards as regards late registration. To improve efficiency and timeliness, particularly for rural and remote areas, WCARO engaged in a global and cross-regional initiative for the development of a digital public good for birth registration.

WCARO built on the *No Name Campaign* – a partnership established with the AU in 2020 – by supporting the organization of a technical consultation, which highlighted how most countries are testing the evidence-based acceleration strategies of interoperability, digitization and decentralization. The campaign also drew the attention of governments to the necessity of clearing the backlog of birth registration cases, exacerbated by the interruption of services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Goal Area 4: Every Child Lives in a Safe and Clean Environment (KRC 8)

KRC 8 seeks, by 2021, for the proportion of the WCAR population practicing open defecation, to be reduced from 25.4% (122 million) in 2015 to 15.6% (88 million). The number of people practicing open defecation in the region decreased by 3 million to 119 million (21.8%) in 2020 (WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme). The KRC 8 target was partially met.

The RO continued to engage strongly in regional partnerships, in particular as a key member of the AfricaSan International Task Force, contributing to raising the profile of open defecation as a priority for the African Minister's Council on Water. WCARO supported 4 COs to showcase their achievements related to sanitation at the Africa Water and Sanitation conference and served as the chair of the hygiene theme during the conference.

WCARO supported the conduct of a sanitation 'hackathon' in Ghana and Nigeria, as part of the #NoPoopChallenge, mobilizing young people as agents of change. The winning teams received mentorship to incubate their ideas via innovation labs in each country.

Together with UNFPA and UNESCO, and with support from the French Muskoka Fund, WCARO contributed to the organization of a regional symposium on menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) – a key sanitation-related barrier to the retention of adolescent girls in school. During the symposium, WCARO issued a literature review and a policy brief on MHH, contributing to policy dialogue with governments and partners.

WCARO supported 3 COs to access catalytic funds to generate evidence on the effectiveness and scalability of the sanitation revolving funds, an innovative funding model whereby government funds and grants are provided to households as loans, via microfinance institutions, to construct toilets.

Gender Equality

The RO supported the implementation of the UNICEF Gender Action Plan 2018-2021, aimed at redressing structural gender inequalities that constrain results for girls and fuel the intergenerational transmission of poverty and disparities.

The RO fostered a partnership with *Girls not Brides*, to support capacity building of national CSOs on gender data generation and analysis to inform laws and programmes. As part of the interagency Regional Gender Thematic Group, the RO led the organization an Africa-wide, action-oriented roundtable on women's financial inclusion, bringing together over 100 organizations from civil society, the private sector and youth groups.

Humanitarian Preparedness and Response

WCARO provided close-proximity support to COs to enhance humanitarian preparedness, monitoring and response. Following the declaration of an Ebola outbreak in Guinea, the RO stepped up preparedness support in the 6 neighbouring countries, involving the vaccination of close to 3,000 frontline workers and 11,000 individuals living in high-risk areas, as well as RCCE, infection prevention control, and psychosocial care activities, in communities, schools and healthcare facilities. WCARO initiated the development of a third-party monitoring guidance package with three other ROs. The 4 coastal countries at-risk of spill-over of conflict from the central Sahel equally benefited from preparedness technical support. The RO invested in expanding the use of humanitarian cash transfers, through trainings in 7 countries and the deployment of specialist expertise.

These contributions enabled UNICEF offices to provide timely, quality humanitarian assistance to children in 2021, for example: 8 million children were vaccinated against measles (126% target); 1.9 million children with severe-acute malnutrition were admitted for treatment (77% target); and 7.7 million children affected by crisis accessed formal or non-formal education (56% target).

KRC Accelerators

The COVID-19 pandemic accentuated the need for scaled up social protection coverage to address multidimensional child poverty. Through the *Building Resilience in the Sahel* programme with WFP, focused on Mali, Mauritania and Niger and supported by the Government of Germany, the RO supported government cash transfers to help mitigate the socioeconomic effects of COVID-19, reaching over 440,000 people. A social protection advocacy campaign, including several Op Eds, was rolled out jointly with the UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office. The RO supported 7 COs on nutrition-sensitive social protection.

Under the WCAR innovation governance framework, the RO supported the design of multi-country innovative solutions, which attracted thematic funding. These involved sanitation micro-financing and a digital birth registration public good, for example.

Strategic Collaboration with the United Nations System

WCARO engaged robustly in the UN development system reform, positioning UNICEF as a strategic contributor to heightened, results-based UN system collaboration for children.

The RO orchestrated a consultation of all COs in the region on their experiences in the implementation

of the country-level Management and Accountability Framework (MAF), which served to inform its revision, and engaged in the development of the regional chapter of the MAF, which delineates regional roles and responsibilities.

WCARO engaged in the Opportunity Issue-Based Coalitions (OIBC), a vehicle for interagency collaboration and flagship initiatives. As part of the OIBC Knowledge Hub Task Group, the RO contributed to operationalizing the Africa Knowledge Management Hub on COVID-19, a one-stop entry point for regional knowledge products, fostering collaboration, networking and South-South learning. The RO contributed to the quality review of Common Country Analyses and UNSDCFs for 12 countries.

As co-chair of the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) Resilience Pillar Group, with FAO and WFP, the RO supported information sharing, knowledge management and joined-up programming, including through the use of the UNICEF Children's Climate Risk Index, launched in 2021.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Significant yet Insufficient Progress towards the KRCs Calls for Recentering on Acceleration Strategies

Since 2018, the Key Results for Children have galvanized UNICEF teams across the region, working through alliances and partnerships, to drive transformative change for children through a common agenda.

Yet, at the close of the final year of the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2018-2021, it is apparent that too few of the top-level KRC targets were met, as longstanding bottlenecks prevailed, exacerbated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing conflicts in the region.

In order to augment the pace of progress, the RMT's commitment to prioritize a set of acceleration strategies will be crucial to overcome bottlenecks. The RO is well-positioned to play an enabling role in this endeavour, notably by supporting the integration of acceleration strategies into a cohort of 17 new Country Programmes that are expected to be developed over the next two years.

Fostering Cross-Functional Collaboration in Favour of Multi-Sector Integration and Multi-Country Action

The ROMP 2022-2025 is predicated on an agile and fit-for-purpose business model. This involves customized, context-responsive and coherent RO technical assistance, cross-functional working modalities and multi-country co-creation of a common agenda, while securing efficiency gains across the region.

In particular, a shift to cross-functional teams within the RO, focused on the KRCs, is expected to contribute to steering COs towards more deliberate multi-sector approaches – a potential game-changer, whereby child deprivations are addressed in a holistic manner, with complementary social sectors pooling their knowledge and assets to amplify the scale of results. Cross-functional teams are well-positioned to foster the uptake of the KRC acceleration strategies across contributing programme areas, such as public finance, advocacy, innovation, evidence generation, social and behaviour change, social protection and shared-value partnerships.

Cross-functional RO teams have also proven to be pertinent vehicles for delivering coherent support to

multiple countries to address complex common issues – a hallmark of Regional Office value addition. A frontrunner has been a team focused on the Sahel, which has successfully channeled the expertise of multiple subject-matter areas towards driving sharp strategic support to COs in the Sahel as well as high-level advocacy at the regional-level. The response to Ebola outbreaks in 2021 is another notable example of multi-country RO support to be built on in the future.

Harmonizing Humanitarian and Development Planning

With 14 countries having issued a Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) appeal and 12 countries having initiated the development of a new Country Programme in 2021, WCAR COs recognized the potential benefits of harmonizing humanitarian and development programme planning.

In 2021, harmonized planning was promoted through a series of thematic clinics, convened by the RO, during which COs developing a new Country Programme had the opportunity to share experiences and innovations related to such cross-cutting topics as conflict sensitivity, UNICEF's new Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, risk-informed programming and programming in the Sahel with a focus on localization. With RO support, the RMT provided further impetus towards harmonized humanitarian and development planning, monitoring and implementation, through a dedicated session during which actions were identified to advance this priority.

Looking forward, the region will continue to spearhead harmonization of humanitarian and development planning for more efficient and impactful programmes.

Expanding Participatory Programming among Young People

RO support to initiatives, such as Generation Unlimited Youth Challenges in 15 countries, has contributed to expanding the demand for participatory programme design and implementation in the region, using human centered design techniques. Efforts to support the sustainable recovery from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are expected to continue to serve as a key opportunity to leverage the reach and influence of young people to improve access to testing, promote healthy water, sanitation and hygiene practices, spread accurate information, conduct research, harness technologies for scale and champion mental wellness, while claiming their rights and holding governments to account.

Broadening the Scope of the Duty of Care Agenda as an Essential Enabler to Stay and Deliver for Children

The region's commitment – supported by the RO through the ROMP 2018-2021 – to fully discharge its duty of care for personnel and promote a positive organizational culture, as a key enabler of results for children, remained at the fore in 2021 with the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on UNICEF personnel, particularly the most vulnerable and those in the most insecure and remote locations, with a focus on gender equality.

Building on an initial focus on improving the living and working conditions of personnel and enhancing organizational culture, and informed by regular personnel surveys, the RMT placed heightened emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion to foster ever greater openness, mutual understanding and respect within offices – as an essential ingredient of dignity and high-performing teams. The RMT equally underscored the importance of promoting psychological safety among personnel, through measures to improve self-awareness and probe unconscious biases, in a manner that is sensitive to context and culture. Flexible work arrangements at the duty station, guided by the imperative of achieving results for children, continued to be recognized as an opportunity to support the well-being of personnel while staying and delivering in complex settings and when faced with sudden-onset crises.

Moving forward, the orientations of the RMT in relation to the foregoing areas will continue to steer the priorities and approaches in the region.

Looking Forward to 2022

In 2022, WCARO will build on the successes and challenges of 2021 and take forward the lessons set out in this report. The RO will be well-positioned to pursue the Key Results for Children in WCAR with renewed vigour, as it embarks upon the implementation of the KRC-focused ROMP 2022-2025.

Through strategic, close-proximity support to Country Offices, catalytic partnerships and alliances, leveraging resources, high-level advocacy and policy dialogue among regional institutions and leaders as well as engagement of adolescents and young people as agents of change, the Regional Office will embody UNICEF's unwavering commitment to the rights enshrined in the CRC, for every child.