Update on the context and trends

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic volatility, climate shocks, protracted humanitarian crises and new conflict hotspots affected children and adolescents in the 21 Eastern and Southern Africa region (ESAR) countries in 2021. A total of 110 million people, including an estimated 57 million children, required humanitarian assistance in the region. This was a notable increase from the 57 million people, including 31.4 million children, that needed assistance in 2020 and reflects the region’s heightened challenges, which guided ESA Regional Office (ESARO) priorities.

After contracting by around 5 per cent in 2020, average economic growth per capita in ESAR was 1 per cent in 2021. 2020 child poverty rates were estimated to have jumped by 10 per cent on average, impacting more than 120 million children; this trend likely persisted in 2021, in step with overall extreme poverty projections across ESAR. Intensifying regional food insecurity and COVID-19 impacts also compounded multidimensional poverty, which was already affecting three out of every four of the region’s 256 million children pre-pandemic. Containment measures responding to new COVID-19 strains impacted economic output and household incomes, hindering investments in children. With two-thirds of ESAR countries in or near debt distress by the year’s end, capacity for increased investments will likely remain restricted for the foreseeable future.

ESAR joined the global COVID-19 vaccination rollout efforts, primarily through the COVAX partnership, which, although progressing, faced significant region-wide challenges linked to equitable access complexities, including lack of timely supply deliveries and limited country absorption capacity. At year’s end, an estimated 15 per cent of the ESAR population had completed COVID-19 vaccine primary series, as compared to approximately 52 per cent of the global population.

Health systems in ESAR, which were already under significant pressure due to population growth and limited financial and human resource capacity, further deteriorated due to COVID-19’s impacts. While some countries generally succeeded in re-establishing continuity of care, others continued to face disruptions to essential preventative, promotive and curative services, including routine and supplementary immunization and polio outbreak response activities. Related impacts were reflected by several public health outbreaks that occurred in early 2022. Significant maternal and child health outcome gains made in the past two decades are at risk in a region where maternal, child and newborn mortality is already unacceptably high. ESAR has the second highest mortality rates globally, and 16 of its 21 countries are not on track to achieve the under-five mortality Sustainable Development Goal indicator. 2021’s multiple crises set ESAR back even further.

Home to 70 per cent of the world’s children and adolescents living with HIV, ESAR remains the global epidemic’s epicentre. Concerted action has produced impressive results; however, treatment coverage for children and adolescents aged 0–19 years remains unacceptably low at 57 per cent. Girls and young women aged 15–24 years make up approximately 10 per cent of the population but account for 27 per cent of all new HIV infections. This glaring inequity is fuelled by poverty; harmful gender and social norms; violence; and other biomedical, behavioural and structural drivers. Furthermore, while data is limited, HIV service provision gaps, especially around testing and prevention, persisted in the COVID-19 context.

In 2021, the nutritional status of children and women was impacted by multiple hazards, including insecurity, floods and the most severe drought conditions in four decades—primarily affecting the Horn of Africa, southern Madagascar, southern Angola and Namibia. Severe wasting affected an estimated 3.6 million children and approximately 47 million people were food insecure. Related
negative effects will likely linger, as mothers reported lower breastfeeding rates and less diverse child diets during the pandemic.

In terms of early childhood development (ECD), the pandemic placed caregivers and services under additional stress and impacted every aspect of nurturing care in a context where two-thirds of children were already at risk of not reaching development potential. Despite evidence that young children growing up in emergency contexts are at the greatest risk of not reaching their full potential, ECD services are inadequately embedded in related response efforts.

No ESAR country is on track to achieve universal access to basic water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services by 2030, with a lack of data and insufficient resources for financing WASH service delivery posing significant challenges. Drought, floods and conflict reduced access to basic WASH services, increasing the number of people in need of humanitarian WASH assistance.

Amidst the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite schools being largely reopened in 2021, more than 30 million learners did not return, in addition to the 37 million children who were out of school pre-COVID-19. Children also remained vulnerable to lingering closure-related impacts on mental health and well-being, and the already alarming learning crisis before the pandemic deepened due to increased learning losses. UNICEF estimates that 10.4 per cent of the world’s 240 million children with disabilities live in ESAR. The educational situation and overall well-being of these children was negatively impacted by COVID-19 and other 2021 crises.

COVID-19-related containment measures continued to cause increased threats to children and women’s safety and well-being, including gender-based violence (GBV), exploitation, abuse and neglect. Protection risks were exacerbated in areas vulnerable to other emergencies, such as conflict and the climate crisis. These conditions further hindered progress toward achieving ESAR’s child protection systems agenda, which already faced limited financial and human resources.

The pandemic had a disproportionately negative impact on girls and women through disrupted access to critical health care, including maternal and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services. Many countries documented the correlation between school closures to date in the pandemic and an increase in unintended adolescent pregnancies. In addition, population displacement and food insecurity associated with crises in the region disproportionately affected girls and women, with increased reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA).

In terms of partnerships, the 2021 context significantly affected the public and private sector landscape in ESAR, leading to some shifts in the engagement and support priorities of numerous key players.

Major contributions and drivers of results

2.1 Key achievements and results

ESARO’s most visible, urgent and high-stakes work was dominated by the COVID-19 response and cross-sector efforts to address secondary pandemic impacts. ESARO supported country offices (COs) on a diverse range of work within the dynamic context of COVID-19 and other regional developments.

Supporting the COVAX partnership for equitable COVID-19 vaccine access was a top priority and remains a challenging corporate initiative. This included vaccine deployment assistance (e.g., country readiness assessments, national vaccine deployment strategy development). A notable achievement was providing hands-on support to CO procurement of COVID-19-related supplies worth US$383.3
ESARO’s COVID-19 response spanned sectors and included risk communication and community engagement that demonstrated UNICEF’s leadership role in this area. UNICEF’s cutting-edge work increased the availability and use of social and behaviour change (SBC) data to inform programming and reinforce advocacy around vaccine uptake, continuity of care, school reopening and abandonment of harmful practices at country level.

The shift toward cross-sectoral climate-resilient programming was an office-wide achievement. Preparations began for a forthcoming Climate Facility to provide related technical assistance to COs and environmental and social safeguarding guidelines were developed, with associated ESAR Deputy Representative training completed.

ESARO redoubled efforts for children with disabilities through inclusive, cross-sectoral programming, including hands-on support from the newly established disability inclusion team that benefited eight COs. Disability inclusive education efforts included finalization of several CO inclusive education policies and regional mapping of progress on inclusive education and learning-to-earning strategies for young people with disabilities. Key approaches in this area included building partnerships, evidence generation and cross-country learning.

ESARO sustained collaboration with core partners, including COVID-19 response stakeholders (e.g., WHO, Africa CDC, community leaders), and areas of acceleration included disability inclusion, adolescent and youth engagement and United Nations Reform.

ESARO remained focused on continuity of essential maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health care services, as well as routine immunization, realizing that these areas would be particularly affected; however, significant challenges persist. ESARO generated evidence to inform action and advocacy around quality of care and domestic health financing and established an essential service continuity monitoring system. To eliminate vaccine-derived polio outbreaks, ESARO has prepared a total of eight countries for novel oral polio vaccine introduction and introduced it in two countries; global supply limitations have been a constraint.

ESARO contributed to stunting reduction by operationalizing the regional Maternal Nutrition Framework and expanding regional adoption of a multi-system Child Diets Framework to two additional countries. Working with FAO, UNHCR, WFP and WHO counterparts, ESARO supported the Global Action Plan for Child Wasting rollout to 13 countries, six of which developed country action plans. Thanks to UNICEF supply provision and technical assistance, over 1.5 million ESAR children were admitted for severe wasting treatment in 2021—an 18 per cent increase over 2020—and 82 million children received vitamin A supplementation, 6.5 million more than in 2020.

In line with the new nutrition strategy and ESAR needs, ESARO strengthened its adolescent nutrition and overweight technical support; initiated a structured food systems transformation approach; supported CO emergency nutrition preparedness and response; and continued to work with the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Inputs were also provided to shape the African Union (AU) Year of Nutrition 2022. ESARO developed climate-sensitive nutrition analysis and programming models and contributed to evidence generation (e.g., three case studies on integrating nutrition into national social protection platforms). ESARO’s work is leading to a shift toward a multi-system approach to prevention of all forms of malnutrition by focusing analysis and interventions related to structural bottlenecks.

Illustrating real progress toward eliminating mother-to-child transmission of HIV in the region, Botswana became the first high-burden country to achieve the related silver-tier milestone benchmarks. ESARO also sustained support to 16 COs to accelerate HIV results (e.g., eliminating vertical transmission). ESARO prioritized upstream support and scale up of evidence-based interventions in partnership with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, resulting
in interventions being scaled up in 13 countries. The 2gether4 SRHR programme transitioned from five countries to a cross-sectoral regional agenda to integrate SRHR, HIV and GBV efforts. ESARO amplified young people’s voices in the HIV context, including through youth-driven SBC activities. Evidence and policy work to improve programming included research on paediatric viral suppression, which was recognized as a 2021 Best of UNICEF Research finalist and applied in various countries.

ESARO supported COs to strengthen capacity for implementing sustainable and equitable WASH emergency and development programming at scale. Support to 14 COs aided in the provision of humanitarian WASH assistance to 8.4 million people out of 9.2 million targeted. To strengthen the humanitarian–development nexus, ESARO supported resource mobilization and programme development related to the Regional Open WASH Programme to benefit refugees and people living in host communities in East Africa, ultimately securing two-phase KfW Development Bank funding totalling approximately US$56.7 million. Collaborating with WaterAid, a SADC Hygiene Strategy was developed and endorsed, with country-specific 2022 actions planned.

Following 2020 closures, the reopening of schools in all countries except Uganda was a key 2021 achievement. Combining advocacy and technical efforts to keep schools safe and open, ESARO organized two significant regional events, gathering education and health ministry officials. With learning outcomes under threat, ESARO accelerated multiple initiatives to strengthen and broaden digital learning solutions, including the Reimagine Education programme in nine countries and the Learning Passport initiative in six countries. Learning from these should ensure further progress and counter COVID-19-related learning losses. COs were eager, with ESARO’s assistance, to adopt global and regional initiatives aimed at strengthening alternative skills and employability [e.g., Youth Agency Marketplace (Yoma)]. To advance gender equality and inclusive education, a high-level roundtable on financing girls’ education was organized in partnership with the AU, the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative and the Forum for African Women Educationalists.

ESARO focused on ensuring the continuity of child protection and GBV services, playing a significant role in building child protection partnerships and advocacy with regional and sub-regional partners (e.g., the East African Community, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, IOM, Save the Children), further strengthening its role as a regional leader. This work also included support for the UNFPA–UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, which marked its five-year anniversary with a high-level virtual event that culminated in ESAR governments and partners recommitting to accelerate action to end child marriage by 2030. ESARO assistance supported 13 COs to include GBV response in their Humanitarian Action for Children appeals and COVID-19 programming and enabled seven COs to progress on strengthening child protection social service workforce quality assurance systems.

ESARO supported COs to measure and contribute to child poverty reduction (e.g., by influencing public financial management processes). Twenty COs reported strengthening social sector budgets, 12 of which reported increases in budget allocations to one or more sectors benefiting children, partly due to ESARO’s efforts. In addition to strategically and technically advising all COs on social protection, 12 COs were supported to expand shock-responsive cash transfers. Evidence generation results included seven regional analyses to influence national and regional agendas. Strong collaboration continued with partners (e.g., the International Budget Partnership, UNDP) to enhance UNICEF influence, and a new strategic partnership began with the Collaborative Africa Budget Reform Initiative. ESARO also supported CO fundraising and improved visibility of related work by systematically uploading CO documents on UNICEF websites.

Needed more than ever in the COVID-19 context, the Nurturing Care Framework was rolled out in 15 COs, providing an evidence-based roadmap for action and outlining how policies and services can support caregivers, families and communities in making nurturing care a reality for all children.
As noted, SBC was a key ESARO COVID-19 response area; however, SBC results also extended further, including working through digital platforms (e.g., Internet of Good Things and U-Report) to mobilize young people around mental health, obesity, SRHR, HIV, inclusion and skill-building.

The number of adolescents participating in UNICEF-supported programmes in ESAR more than tripled from nearly 528,700 in 2020 to over 1.6 million in 2021. Aligning with government priorities, ESARO supported COs on related strategy formulation, partnerships (e.g., Generation Unlimited), and identifying entry points for meaningful participation in relevant initiatives, such as UPSHIFT—a youth social innovation and social entrepreneurship programme. ESARO also mobilized resources and technical support for rollout of the Oky app, which was co-created with girls to support menstrual health.

Recognizing the importance of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) especially in COVID-19 times, a multisectoral regional Working Group mapped related UNICEF engagement to inform further programming. ESARO developed an MHPSS investment case and expanded its collaboration and joint advocacy with WHO in the context of the associated 10-year joint UNICEF–WHO programme. An MHPSS chatbot was developed and implemented in three ESAR countries.

As mentioned above, the procurement load in 2021 multiplied considerably due to the COVID-19 response. ESARO contributed to government support through procurement service mechanisms and provided COs with COVAX-related support, including real-time technical assistance and facilitation of multiple vaccine shipments. This led to avoiding many related pitfalls, including preventing expiration-related vaccine losses. Local procurement volumes continued to rise, having increased from US$77 million in 2019 to US$111.8 million in 2021. Acknowledging the delicate dynamics related to COVID-19 supplies, ESARO played a strategic role in negotiating with major African stakeholders and the wider supply community, including by promoting local manufacturing capabilities.

ESARO also played a key role in ideating and designing the multi-agency Nairobi-based Digital Health Centre of Excellence to help countries identify and scale up needs-based digital health solutions. UNICEF and WHO advocated support from partners (e.g., Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, U.S. CDC, European Union and Gavi) for rapid digital health solution vis-à-vis COVID-19. In addition to providing technical support on information and communication technology and innovation to all 21 COs, ESARO contributed to the design and rollout of the global UNICEF Technology Playbook, a step-by-step guide for implementing technology programmes, and INVENT, a global registry of UNICEF-supported technology for development and innovation interventions to which over 500 ESAR initiatives have been uploaded to date.

ESARO supported strategic planning for new country programmes, as well as knowledge management efforts, including knowledge product development and dissemination, at country and regional levels. Evaluations of past country programmes, humanitarian responses and multi-country/multi-year programmes were implemented to inform future approaches. ESARO worked closely with COs to strengthen evaluation quality, as reflected in independent high-quality ratings, and update the Regional Evaluation Framework with 2022–2025 targets, focusing on use and uptake. ESARO supported evidence-based programming in the COVID-19 response context, having finalized Phase II of the real-time assessment of UNICEF’s country-level response and completed an ESARO Compendium of Select 2020–2021 COVID-19 Response Lessons Learned.

Overall, ESAR implemented programmes with a throughput of US$1.3 billion, up from US$1.2 billion in 2020. Globally, the pandemic and other crises significantly affected the partnership landscape. Increasing restrictions on and earmarking of public donor funding required more sophistication in forecasting and utilization. ESARO supported COs to use partnership management platform UNISON and provided resource mobilization and partnerships support to all COs, securing over 10 new public and private sector partners for the region. This included new avenues for obtaining
and leveraging funding for children with foundations, one notable example being a partnership supporting the Graça Machel Trust’s initiative to further a continental movement that empowers girls in Africa to fully participate in their own development.

2.2 Cross-cutting area results

2.2.1 Normative principles

ESARO contributed to developing the UNICEF Gender Policy and Gender Action Plan 3 and co-led a position paper on masculinity and working with boys and men to achieve gender equality. UNICEF worked with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to produce a report on regional gender-responsive disaster risk management. The ESAR Gender and Adolescent Working Group developed a Multisectoral Framework for Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancy and Support to Adolescent Mothers to help COs meet UNICEF minimum standards.

ESARO made leadership contributions to the migration agenda and ensured children were placed at the centre, as evident in the Review of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. ESARO co-led part of the Review’s Regional Multi-Stakeholder Consultation, which garnered valuable reflections on implementation progress, gaps, challenges and opportunities.

ESARO supported all COs to strengthen response to and prevention of SEA (PSEA), with a focus on access to services and reporting mechanisms, investigation and accountability. All COs completed implementing partner PSEA assessments and supported high- and moderate-risk partners to develop action plans. ESARO also rolled out new SEA reporting guidance.

ESARO supported COs in integrating rights- and results-based management (RRBM) approaches in the strategic planning process, including by designing and facilitating five remote RRBM workshops that reached 218 UNICEF personnel, with a focus on COs preparing country programme documents. This helped build a common understanding of human rights-based approaches and contributed to the development of rights-focused cutting-edge country programmes.

2.2.2 Humanitarian situations

In line with government and inter-agency response plans and the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (CCC), ESARO worked with partners and COs to maximize life-saving services for children and families affected by climatic shocks, conflict and disease outbreaks, including populations in displacement and refugee camps. ESARO focused regional emergency response coordination efforts around three emergencies designated for Level 2 corporate response [i.e., the Cabo Delgado (Mozambique) and northern Ethiopia crises, southern Madagascar drought]; intensive support was organized for the affected COs. ESARO also supported all COs to prepare for and respond to various other emergencies. To ensure a voice from the field, ESARO contributed to regional and global humanitarian policy initiatives, such as the Global Compact on Refugees and CCC revision. Key partnerships included the Blueprint for Joint Action for Refugee Children with UNHCR.

2.2.3 Influencing global/regional discourse and policy

ESARO explored new avenues to leverage partnerships for children in the COVID-19 era. A five-year Memorandum of Understanding between UNICEF and Airtel Africa established a shared-value partnership to benefit 13 countries with improved access to remote learning and school connectivity. Private sector partnerships with LIXIL and S-5 Sanitation were established to advance sanitation marketing, market shaping and youth employment opportunities, illustrating that broad partnership is key to developing sustainable sanitation solutions. With UNICEF Headquarters and National Committee support, private sector engagements were explored as part of the climate-resilient Green
Climate Fund proposal with the Development Bank of Southern Africa. For the first time in ESARO, a
disability inclusion partnership was established with the Southern African Federation of the Disabled.

UNICEF leadership enabled Yoma to achieve over 2 million youth engagements through its various
partners. Yoma was also mentioned as a good practice by then German Chancellor Angela Merkel
during a high-level European Union-hosted event and won the Austrian Blockchain Award.
ESARO engaged regional bodies and leaders to advance children’s rights. With the Government of
Botswana, UNICEF organized a regional World Children’s Day celebration in Botswana’s Kasane
town, near the Namibian, Zambian and Zimbabwean borders. The four respective Heads of State
joined to reconfirm their commitment to children’s rights and—moderated by the UNICEF ESA
Regional Director—dialogued with children on topics ranging from climate change to gender equality.
ESARO prioritized a few areas, including education, health and gender, for targeted AU collaboration.
Regional economic community engagement continued and will be a 2022–2025 RO Management Plan
(ROMP) focus.

ESARO advocacy around COVID-19 vaccine equity included facilitating an open letter from African
influencers and highlighting the pandemic’s secondary impacts on children through social and
traditional media, including op-eds and press event participation. In line with the 2022–2025 ROMP,
this lay the foundation to position thought leadership more prominently.
ESARO participated in United Nations Reform efforts, including at the regional level. ESARO
contributed to the strategic discussions of the Africa Regional Collaborative Platform and worked
together with sister agencies in several opportunity/issue-based coalitions, for example coordinating
dialogues with partners around building community resilience to climate shocks. Regional discussions
on common back offices also continued. ESARO supported COs as they moved United Nations
Reform forward at the country level, including the preparation of new country programmes that are
fully aligned with and derived from United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation
Frameworks, and supported all COs to strengthen contributions to the United Nations working as one.

2.2.4 Internal management

Due regional management processes occurred: two Regional Management Team and Deputy
Representative meetings were held, providing platforms to discuss strategic programmatic and
management issues and solutions.

Steps were taken to balance duty of care for staff with UNICEF accountability to stay and deliver.
Flexible working arrangements and a reduced office footprint were implemented, and 97 per cent of
staff received two COVID-19 vaccine doses. ESARO provided tailored staff counselling to address
COVID-19’s long-haul impacts. To meet increased service demand, psychosocial and counselling
efforts were further institutionalized and scaled up, reaching a total of over 2,000 personnel—of 700
targeted—through group engagements and providing 1,300 individual counselling sessions—against
500 targeted.

The pandemic continued to affect human resource management, including recruitment, learning and
development and performance management. Leadership development initiatives, such as the
Management Masterclass and Female Talent Initiative, were implemented online. ESARO remained
focused on improving organizational culture based on 2020 Global Staff Survey and 2021 Pulse
Survey results; examples of positive workplace practices were disseminated. Many surge support
requests were met remotely or through standby partner deployment.

In addition to monitoring key regional performance indicators, ESARO supported three programme
budget reviews, resulting in more fit-for-purpose office structures for 15 COs. As part of its oversight
role, ESARO supported COs through four internal and three external audit processes, including two
peer reviews to improve internal CO processes. ESARO received an external audit mission, which was
successfully handled with zero recommendations.

ESARO supported all COs to strengthen security systems, including carrying out on-site emergency preparedness assessments in countries affected by conflict, instability and increased crime levels. ESARO security contributions also included a Nairobi-based workshop that strengthened the capacity of regional security personnel to leverage digital transformation in their day-to-day work for children and UNICEF personnel.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

ESARO complemented the finalization of Phase II of the real-time assessment of UNICEF’s country-level COVID-19 response by compiling a Compendium of Select 2020–2021 COVID-19 Response Lessons Learned. The Compendium was framed and articulated around just five of the several strategic-level learning themes in line with the 2022–2025 ROMP, namely: (1) systems strengthening; (2) innovation and technology for development; (3) public and private partnerships; (4) resilience and risk preparedness; and (5) child rights advocacy. Key 2021 lessons are therefore herein summarized according to these themes.

System strengthening consistently emerged as a priority concern and major task for ESARO. With the pandemic, systems were not permitted to operate, or were found to be insufficiently equipped or funded to sustain sorely needed services. COVID-19 revealed underlying vulnerabilities and gaps in local systems and professional workforces, while compelling caregivers to become first responders for children. Key Compendium findings highlighted that: (1) ESARO sections needed to work together as sectoral efforts must be woven together to address systemic gaps; (2) local sourcing (ranging from supplies to human resources and beyond) had to be made more responsive, relevant and sustainable; (3) ESARO technical guidance needed to be simplified and delivered via practical tools rather than academic top-level guidance; and (4) rapid, real-time data on community realities could be significantly strengthened.

These lessons were already reflected in ESARO’s actions in 2021: ESARO supported COs to strengthen community platforms in mitigating and responding to the pandemic in a more holistic and coordinated approach, while public finance and social protection (Cash Plus) work was accelerated. National coordination for supply and logistics and exploration of local markets were critical as ESARO provided undivided technical guidance and support to countries to participate in COVAX. Context-specific simplifications to treatment protocols for severe wasting were sustained and, as a result, access to treatment expanded in 2021. The year also saw further acceleration of community feedback mechanisms that provided real-time data and analysis on how people perceived and responded to COVID-19 vaccination, as well as information and misinformation, and helped ESARO design its response.

Innovation and technology for development, including the use of digital platforms, provided invaluable lessons and opportunities. The aforementioned acceleration of community feedback mechanisms was driven by technology and its ability to scale such efforts. The potential of future digital platforms is immense in terms of how ESARO could strengthen feedback and accountability. Support to COs on e-training options continued to be expanded by ESARO, with the largest scale occurring in education, both for teachers through training to use digital curricula and for students through the digital learning toolkit. ESARO also promoted the use of digital options to facilitate early capture of evidence and lessons and help rapid cross-learning and knowledge management. ESARO introduced a variety of information-sharing options to leverage learning among the region’s 21 COs. The remaining challenge will be how ESARO can support making digital options inclusive and equitable in a region that still faces internet penetration constraints and limited access among disadvantaged groups.
Public and private partnerships at the regional level continued to be crucial elements of ESARO’s CO support strategy. The Compendium validated existing collaboration/networking models and recognized the value of new partnership models. ESARO observed that while most schools reopened in 2021 and many children returned to school, adequate learning still did not take place. To invest sufficiently in the preparedness and resilience of education systems to face future shocks and ensure continued learning for all children, ESARO focused on establishing and strengthening global and regional partnerships with the likes of those previously mentioned and others, like EdTech Hub—a global research partnership. ESARO deepened its conversations around partnerships with academic institutions. For example, to advance evidence in HIV, ESARO initiated twinning of regional academic institutions with organizations and universities from the Global North, thereby enriching the substance of work and contributing to sustainability. Inter-agency partnerships around specific agendas, such as SRHR and gender, were valuable not only because of shared financial and human resources but also given their impact vis-à-vis stronger advocacy, improvements in the policy environment and scale up of integrated services. As earlier mentioned, private sector partnership was also an important 2021 results area in collaboration with entities like Airtel Africa and LIXIL.

Resilience and risk preparedness drew particular attention in the context of the pandemic. The Compendium highlighted several observations: (1) Community platforms can provide a more holistic response; (2) risk-informed/shock-responsive programming in UNICEF is not sufficiently apparent, despite general agreement that it is essential for improved preparedness; and (3) UNICEF needs to ensure the new capacities and skills gained by UNICEF and partners during the COVID-19 response are not lost when attention turns to recovery and beyond. Based on key emergency responses in the region in 2021, ESARO observed that UNICEF offices faced significant difficulties mobilizing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were not present in the emergency zones. It is important to prepare small local NGOs to be effective implementers of humanitarian response and maximize partnership with local civil protection movements and national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; while reliant on country-level action, ESARO can encourage these efforts. Emergency experience continued to affirm the need to reinforce COs’ risk-informed programming. Especially, gaps in preparedness to address gender inequality led ESARO to engage with numerous partners to ensure gender-related risk mitigation and response in the future.

High-profile engagement in child rights advocacy continues to be of utmost importance to ESARO and ESAR COs, including in terms of securing continued public commitment to the pandemic response for children. The Compendium pointed out that while large contributions have already been pledged for the coming years, resources have yet to be fully secured for recovery in the region, including for children. ESARO will continue its efforts in high-level advocacy on child rights and engage with partners, cognizant of increasing challenges in readiness to protect children’s rights in the face of the unpredictability of the pandemic and climate-induced disasters.