Regional Office Annual Report 2021

South Asia

Update on the context and trends

South Asia Region (SAR) was severely affected by COVID-19 in terms of both caseload and mortality in 2021. COVID-19 exacerbated longstanding challenges. Its impact was widespread and it caused many thousands of deaths due to limited health services and exposed severe shortcomings in health systems that were brought to the brink of collapse. The impact was also seen in increased maternal and neonatal mortality and stunting rates. The region was set back one decade in terms of immunization rates. It resulted in hundreds of millions of children out of school for long periods. And it increased child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, among other significant impacts.

Global efforts to introduce lifesaving COVID-19 vaccines in the region were hampered by limited global vaccine availability and an inequitable distribution of vaccines in favour of the developed world for the greater part of the year. Vaccines became more readily available in the region later in the year and a total of 1.6 billion doses were administered in SAR with one-third of the population (618 million people) fully vaccinated by the end of 2021.

A modelling study on the ‘Direct and indirect effects of COVID-19 pandemic and response in South Asia’ revealed that, indirectly, many more died or were affected by disruptions to health and other social services. The full impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated socio-economic effects on maternal and child nutrition in the region are yet to be fully understood. Estimates from another global modelling study indicate that compared to projections without COVID-19, in a moderate to worse-off scenario there will be an additional 6.2 to 9.3 million children under the age of five years with wasting in South Asia in 2022, and 790,000 stunted children in 2022. COVID-19 also resulted in high levels of learning loss, as schools closed for an extended period. It is estimated that 420 million students were out of school due to the pandemic, with 9 million estimated to have dropped out permanently.

In sharp contrast with pre-pandemic projections, all but one of the region’s economies posted negative growth rates. The exception was Bangladesh, where growth rates slowed sharply but did not become negative. Analyses have shown that in terms of foregone growth opportunity, the emerging markets of Asia lost the most after 2020. All governments announced fiscal packages to strengthen aggregate demand and help crisis response. In the case of Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan, the fiscal effort was several times larger than that of the earlier financial crisis – however, it was still not possible to prevent a significant fall in GDP and massive job losses. The World Bank estimated the pandemic caused between 48 and 59 million people to become or remain poor in South Asia during 2021.

Despite notable economic growth in recent years, the unequal distribution of these gains has meant that poverty and deprivation remain a widespread concern and SAR has the second highest cohort of the extremely poor at 33.4 per cent.

Recent UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) studies such as Claiming Citizenship: Case Studies of Adolescent Participation in Governance in South Asia, and Reimagining Humanitarian Action: A Study of Adolescent Engagement in Humanitarian Action highlight that while good practices exist in engagement and participation across development and humanitarian settings, adolescents were still seen through protection, beneficiary or instrumentalist lenses. They felt unheard by authorities, even in domains where intentional efforts have been made to strengthen participation mechanisms. This is in already constrained contexts where adolescent voices are not heard due to age-based social norms and adult interests governing policy spaces. These trends are exacerbated by deficit models of framing and engaging with adolescents including normalized structural violence against children and adolescents, inadequate evidence founded on adolescent aspirations and adolescent-led inquiry, and lack of capacities and opportunities for informed voice and influence.
The crisis in Afghanistan severely impacted millions of children and their families. It remains one of the key threats to regional stability. There was a deterioration in every measure of child wellbeing in the country since the transition of power in August 2021, which impacted access, limited supply and demand of services and brought further turmoil to a country after decades of war. Escalating conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, disease outbreaks, unprecedented severe drought, severe winter weather and the political transition resulted in many uncertainties, including deepening poverty and intensifying vulnerabilities to 18.4 million people with humanitarian needs.

**Major contributions and drivers of results**

**Every child survives and thrives**

While newborn mortality reduced slightly to 24 deaths per 1,000 live births compared to 25 in 2020, some 838,000 newborns still died in their first month of life. Under-five mortality fell marginally to 38 deaths per 1,000 live births compared to 40 in 2020.

The region was set back a decade in its immunization rates with DPT3 coverage for example dropping by 6 percentage points to 84 per cent. That translates into 4.4 million zero-dose children and 0.9 million children not fully vaccinated. Afghanistan and Pakistan are the world’s only remaining polio-endemic countries with five confirmed cases of wild poliovirus detected: a significant improvement over the 135 cases in 2020. ROSA supported countries in their responses to COVID-19 by strengthening immunization supply chains and oxygen systems and ensuring the continuity of essential services. Coordinated advocacy and communication messages amplified through social media proved valuable in COVID-19 prevention, vaccine uptake and service continuity. ROSA collaborated closely with WHO and provided regional guidelines, and established data monitoring and mapping systems. Findings from three key studies were disseminated: ‘South Asia Newborn Investment Case Report’ through a regional webinar on World Prematurity day; ‘Direct and indirect effects of COVID-19 pandemic and response in South Asia’ along with a ‘Call for Action’; and ‘Accelerating progress towards Universal Health Coverage in South Asia in the era of COVID-19’ discussed at a regional round table with ministers and high-level officials from all countries in the region.

The number of stunted, under-five children in South Asia declined from 57.4 million in 2018 to 53.8 million in 2020. The protracted COVID-19 pandemic and its indirect socio-economic impacts continued to compound the vulnerability of children to malnutrition and threatened to unravel years of progress on nutrition in the region. Technical support was provided for the development of the UN Global Action Plan on child wasting country roadmaps (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan), for dealing with significant humanitarian nutrition needs in Afghanistan, and for estimating the costs of scaling-up treatment of child wasting in select states in India. The Public Finance for Children—Nutrition e-learning programme was rolled out to government, while UNICEF further strengthened capacities to optimize public budgets for nutrition. Regional coordination of the nutrition sector was enhanced through technical leadership of the Network for Improved Nutrition in South Asia, mobilizing regional partners around priority collaborative nutrition actions. In collaboration with its regional partners, UNICEF influenced regional discourse and policy on nutrition through development and dissemination of several knowledge products. These included peer-reviewed publications on assessment of nutrient gaps and affordability of complementary foods in South Asia; a regional review of status of policy and programme gaps in nutrition actions and data systems; and regional landscape review of status of iodine nutrition and Universal Salt Iodization (USI) programmes in South Asia.

In 2021, the education, nutrition and health sectors collaborated on capacity development efforts to strengthen care for early childhood development. Countries were supported to further operationalize the nurturing care framework through regional orientation meetings. And in collaboration with WHO, a regional multi-sectoral meeting with government stakeholders was convened.
Every child learns
Country Offices were helped to develop education COVID-19 response plans and guidance, including practical guidance on the safe reopening of schools, analysis of coverage and effectiveness of remote learning offerings, and participation in remote engagements with Ministries of Education for lesson-sharing. Technical assistance was provided to Country Offices on remediation, for example through the Essential Learning Package and remote learning guidance. This includes practical advice through which remote learning modalities reach the most children in each country, as well as the critical components of any learning recovery model. This aligns with the mission recovery approach that UNICEF and the World Bank jointly developed globally. UNICEF also conducted a one-week Education in Emergencies training for seven Country Offices, government and partners, with the Global Education Cluster.

ROSA led a number of critical publications, including the Mapping of Disability-Inclusive Education Practices in South Asia and the Situation Analysis of the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 in Asia, and supported UNICEF Country Offices in leading research on learning continuity. The survey findings on the reach and effectiveness of remote learning guided advocacy on a return to school and was widely disseminated through webinars, a publication in the International Journal of Educational Development, and a UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti Report. ROSA also released U-Report findings to understand youth perspectives on climate change and education.

ROSA continued its leading role within the Asia-Pacific Technical Working Group (TWG) Learning and Education 2030+ as one of the Co-Chairs, a TWG that has been recognized as example of good practice in the new Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) structure. In response to COVID-19 school closures, two new Asia-Pacific TWGs were formed and co-chaired by ROSA: School Health, Nutrition and Well-being TWG, as well as the Digital Transformation and Learning TWG.

Every child is protected from violence and exploitation
ROSA strengthened Country Office child protection programming to respond to humanitarian crisis, deliver on planned interventions and align Country Programmes with the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022-2025, and Child Protection Strategy. It provided ongoing technical support, evidence generation and knowledge management. Partnerships were strengthened with regional networks and bodies, in particular the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), South Asia Coordination Group (SACG), South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC) and ESCAP, the latter resulting in a ministerial commitment to improve civil registration and vital statistics in the region. Support was also provided to strengthen programming on GBViE and on child marriage and child labour.

Support provided by ROSA strengthened Country Office prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) with delivery of a seven-part training programme to PSEA focal points throughout the region. Technical guidance on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programming was prioritized for all countries in the region, especially Afghanistan in light of the recent humanitarian crisis.

The ROSA took the lead in producing and disseminating public goods and several other knowledge products which UNICEF COs used to support their programme implementation. These public goods offer evidence on violence against children, child marriage, child labour, disabilities, civil registration, legal frameworks and how child protection systems in countries in the region adapted and responded to the pandemic. A new South Asia Knowledge Platform on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and
Abuse was developed and the platforms on Child Protection, Ending Child Marriage in South Asia and Children with Disabilities were maintained.

Every child lives in a safe and clean environment
210 million fewer people practiced open defecation and 75 million more people had access to climate-resilient water services. Water quality assessments and water safety planning were conducted with climate-resilient WASH assessments. Climate financing sessions were organized for Country Offices focusing on applying for Green Climate Fund (GCF) readiness funding. Significant support to strengthening WASH and IPC in schools and health facilities was provided. An inter-ministerial education meeting, the 8th International Learning Exchange for WASH in Schools and Hand Hygiene for Asia regional webinar series, was undertaken, as was a regional survey of hand hygiene. ROSA helped all Country Offices to develop hand hygiene roadmaps, with Pakistan becoming the first country in the world to finalize its national roadmap. Training was provided on WASHFIT and improving the quality of care in healthcare facilities focusing on IPC. Support was provided to develop Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) snapshots and a national MHH strategy for Bangladesh. Collaboration continued with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), with significant progress made in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan and strategic planning strengthened at the regional level.

55 WASH-related knowledge products were developed and disseminated. Capacity development initiatives included training courses on knowledge management, city-wide inclusive sanitation, safely managed sanitation, and Environmental and Social Safeguards (ESS). Guidance on sustainability checks and WASH financing was also provided.

Every child has an equitable chance in life
ROSA guided the analysis and response to the pandemic’s socio-economic impact in social protection, Public Finance for Children (PF4C), and child poverty. ROSA concentrated on knowledge generation to help countries make evidence-based decisions as they strengthen and expand their social protection programmes, including:
· A working paper on universal child benefits, demonstrating the viability and urgency for all countries in South Asia to invest in social security for children as stipulated by the CRC;
· A ground-breaking report with the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti assessing the state of Family Friendly Policies (FFP) across the region was finalized. It focused on extending FFP to the informal sector and on the role of social protection;
· A review of impact evaluation studies of social protection programmes on socio-economic outcomes was conducted. It assembled a sample of 63 rigorous impact evaluation studies – using quasi-experimental estimation strategies – for 17 flagship social assistance programmes.

In terms of PF4C, UNICEF supported the growth of the portfolio in the region as well as building the foundations for a regional strategy for public finance for South Asia. In collaboration with the EU, a regional webinar showcasing public finance management work for children in the Asia Pacific region was conducted. This built on the support to seven countries, of which four are in South Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), and aimed to improve public finance management effectiveness in relevant areas and to strengthen dialogue and cooperation on national budgeting and planning and on social policy reforms.

Cross-cutting: Humanitarian context and response
South Asia was particularly hard hit by recurrent and specifically the deadliest surge of COVID-19 in April-May 2021 where the region accounted for half of all new cases worldwide. It experienced severe shortages of oxygen and critical medical supplies. ROSA supported Country Offices in revising the
Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) appeal, most urgently for India as the most affected country, and more than doubling its funding request to $126.7 million and the regional HAC covering Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka. It launched a flash appeal to meet the immediate oxygen and medical supply needs. UNICEF ensured a powerful public message of stay and deliver in the face of the crisis in Afghanistan related to with the transition of power. ROSA initiated contingency planning and supported in-country and cross-border response planning. Staff were deployed on surge to scale-up implementation and support the development of the 2022 HAC appeal, the largest humanitarian appeal in UNICEF history with a US$2 billion funding request. All major crises and natural disasters were well captured in regular regional situation reports and through social media channels, ensuring robust advocacy and resource mobilization.

Change Strategy 1: Programming excellence for at-scale results for children
Technical support was provided to Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan in the development of the UN Global Action Plan on child wasting country roadmaps, providing a multi-system framework to support national scale-up efforts to address child wasting. The Public Finance for Children-Nutrition e-learning programme was rolled out to government officials of the three countries while UNICEF further strengthened capacities to optimize public budgets for nutrition.

Change Strategy 2: Gender-responsive programming
Capacity building initiatives for staff and partners for effective gender integration, strategic regional gender research, knowledge and evidence generation, and technical quality assurance and institutional effectiveness measures, were conducted. Gender-transformative programming, including a focus on adolescent girls, was strengthened.

Change Strategy 3: Winning support for the cause of children from decision-makers and the wider public
Strategic regional positioning on crises with significant reputational risks for the organization, including the COVID-19 second wave and the Afghanistan transition of power, led to soaring media coverage, with over 8,000 articles mentioning UNICEF. Traffic to the ROSA website doubled while digital growth increased by 17 per cent, re-affirming UNICEF’s position as a source of credible information and engagement. Key advocacy moments including back to school, COP26 and a regional event on child wasting were leveraged to influence decision-makers to act for children. The South Asia region led a high-level, regional UNICEF @75 event for advocacy gains, including commitments on the part of SAARC and senior government officials.

Change Strategy 4: Developing and leveraging resources and partnerships for children
ROSA leveraged strategic opportunities to diversify engagement with a wider range of public and private sector partners, strengthening both existing partnerships and seeking opportunities for new engagement. In response to the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, engagement with World Bank successfully mobilized resources across health and education, and engagement with the IFIs continued. Child rights were placed high on the agenda of political leaders through the partnership with SAARC for the UNICEF @75 celebrations, which engaged governments and youth from across the region in renewed commitments for children. Partnership with ESCAP was expanded in CRVS, statistics and data for children.

Change Strategy 5: Leveraging the power of business and markets for children
Business for Results training for four UNICEF offices and thematic deep dives contributed to 250-plus staff improving their understanding of business and integrating it into programme and planning.
Evidence informed programming and partnerships, e.g. a ground-breaking report on gender stereotypes in marketing with the Geena Davis Institute; a review of family-friendly policies across South Asia with the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, which led to new and enhanced partnerships leveraging business assets, practices and voice. Overall, ROSA engaged 783 businesses and established the foundation for a dedicated cluster focusing on income from the private sector.

Change Strategy 6: United Nations working together
ROSA was fully engaged in UN Reform and contributed to the Inter-agency Business Coalition (IBC) related to Human Mobility and Urbanization. This helped the development of strategic interventions to respond to COVID-19. ROSA, through the peer support mechanism which supported the development of India, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka Common Country Analysis (CCAs).

UNICEF in partnership with FAO, WFP, and WHO regional offices, convened a virtual regional advocacy event for Asia-Pacific on child wasting and countries were urged to accelerate actions for prevention and treatment of child wasting. The Asia UN Network on Nutrition continued to support advocacy and monitoring of the food security and nutrition situation in Asia Pacific region through joint development and dissemination of the 2021 report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in Asia Pacific.

Change Strategy 7: Fostering innovation in programming and advocacy for children
A wide range of innovations were fostered during 2021, including through $4.5 million awarded to projects in South Asia to develop a mental health chatbot and counselling services for adolescents; provision of low-bandwidth information on climate change; information on living with COVID-19 for young people with feature phones; support to the development of an open-source digital birth registration system; and creation of a digital platform for young people to learn human-centred design skills based on the UPSHIFT methodology. U-Report continued to grow with 1.5 million users in India, 850,000 in Bangladesh, 1.1 million in Afghanistan, and 25,000 in Sri Lanka.

Change Strategy 8: Using the power of evidence to drive change for children
ROSA supported 28 evaluations in the region, the highest number for several years. 15 were implemented directly by the Regional Office, including Country Programme Evaluations for Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. They provided much-needed evidence as these countries developed their Country Programme Documents. This also contributed substantially to COVID-19-related evidence, completing an evaluation on the extent to which gender was integrated in the response, and supporting community rapid assessments in India, Nepal and Pakistan.

Enabler 1: Responsive, transparent and accountable internal governance
The pandemic posed serious challenges to operations teams in the region. Teams were affected personally, had to work remotely, and efforts to ensure a rapid humanitarian response as well as to ensure duty of care for staff and partners added to the workload. In May 2021, a virtual regional in-action lessons learned session was held with the participation from Country Office colleagues in finance, admin, HR, supply and HACT to document the experience. This underpinned the importance of UN coordination, as well as Headquarters and Regional Office support, in applying simplifications and decentralized decision-making.

Enabler 2: Results-oriented, efficient and effective management
UNICEF continued to provide technical guidance for Country Programme Document development and Strategic Moments for Reflection for four UNICEF Country Offices (Maldives, India, Pakistan, and
Sri Lanka). Integration of knowledge management and evidence into programme management processes were also supported. ROSA provided oversight and quality assurance to Country Offices in the region, for instance, annual reports and donor reports.

Enabler 3: Staff capacity to drive change for children
ROSA focused on bringing the right talent to the right jobs in a timely manner while diversifying the workforce to help offices deliver results despite challenges caused by the pandemic. The programme scale-up in Afghanistan was supported effectively with massive recruitment drives to increase the workforce on the ground to rapidly meet programme demands. A number of key learning and development initiatives were rolled out for the first time in the region, including a global induction for new staff, a regional mentoring programme, and a client service orientation to build and strengthen capacity for staff.

Enabler 4: Versatile, safe and secure knowledge and information systems
ROSA supported and strengthened programme initiatives, such as technical consultancy and advice on digital and technology for development solutions to assist with delivery of results, while developing business process automation applications, supporting development of knowledge management sites, enhancing ICT infrastructure, continuing to provide ICT support and providing additional assistance to ICTD transition and transformation at a global level.

Enabler 5: A stronger, values-based organizational culture
ROSA continued its efforts to build a conducive working environment and supportive culture. ROSA is rated as among the top offices globally and has the most significant improvement in staff engagement between two Pulse Check surveys. Teams were encouraged to unpack and build psychologically-safe environments and commit to core values. Special measures and support were introduced to ensure wellbeing and duty of care for staff, especially during the highly challenging peak of the pandemic. Core values featured prominently in the induction of new personnel for them to embrace the values from the beginning of their employment journey with UNICEF.

Lessons Learned and Innovations
The unprecedented pandemic dictated how UNICEF organized itself to respond, including establishing innovative approaches and learning lessons as the situation evolved. UNICEF continued its leadership in efficient and effective technical assistance to Country Offices to develop COVID-19 responses and preparedness plans. UNICEF provided capacity development on remote collaboration tools to ensure the Regional Office and Country Offices continue operating especially during the devasting second wave particularly in Nepal and India. While the pandemic introduced a new normal with hybrid or blended working arrangements, the culture of working under these new conditions is still evolving. Willingness to embrace new solutions to collaborate in these circumstances has increased. UNICEF leveraged support by organizing awareness sessions for staff on the use of tools and applications, such as business process automation.
The pandemic highlighted the importance of hand hygiene and WASH in schools, healthcare facilities and public spaces. Lessons learned in the context of school reopening presented an opportunity to increase investment for WASH in schools and ensure services are sustainable. Lessons learned on safely managed sanitation services and urban sanitation indicate the need to further adopt market influencing strategies to strengthen private sector engagement in sanitation. The documentation of best practices and innovation in climate-resilient WASH was critical to clearer messaging for fundraising purposes and to share best practice.
The pandemic highlighted the importance of social protection and its role in building back better. Very
key is the importance of both monetary and multidimensional poverty and its mainstreaming across sectors as a key driver to children’s wellbeing. In terms of Social Policy, UNICEF built partnerships to continue monitoring poverty and bringing to the fore of the regional and national agenda to ensure the economic recovery goes hand in hand with the social recovery for children.

Complex emergencies require greater input from UNICEF and the documentation of lessons learned from complex emergencies strengthened programming support and response. Regionally, UNICEF led the production and dissemination of public goods and other knowledge products. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan highlighted the need for streamlined and strengthened child protection surge capacity to ensure speedy deployment of human resources. A key lesson learned is the critical role of technical support to strategy development for programming at scale in a complex humanitarian situation.

Momentum generated through regional processes and events benefit from dedicated resources at country level to cascade learning and translate commitments into sustainable at-scale actions at country level. Lack of recent representative population-based survey data hampers efforts for a complete understanding of the pandemic’s impacts on nutrition and for evaluating adequacy and effectiveness of public policy responses.

While governments implemented various remote learning initiatives in South Asia, more is needed to ensure marginalized children can continue learning during school closure. More so, addressing the huge scale of learning loss and widening disparities requires greater investment in building teacher capacity, assessing learning and learning recovery to avert further learning loss once children return to school. Inadequate real time data for example on school reopening, attendance, learning levels, etc., has hampered the ability to understand realities on the ground in a rapidly evolving situation.

Extreme surges of COVID-19 cases and the Afghanistan crisis underpinned the importance of emergency preparedness. Despite substantial investment already made, more needs to be done to support Country Offices further enhance their preparedness to respond during onsets of emergencies in a timely and effective manner. UNICEF continued to identify Country Office surge capacities and expand the regional surge roster. It also continued to preposition emergency supplies and LTAs, establish contingency programme documents and assess the feasibility of humanitarian cash transfer. Joint preparedness planning and review of preparedness/contingency plans with cross-sectoral participations was further strengthened at both Regional Office and Country Office levels.

UNICEF South Asia is increasingly recognizing that content is the new currency, particularly in an increasingly digitally connected region. It invested heavily in boosting its digital team. Adopting a less risk-adverse, more genuine, human, and relatable face on social media has the potential to yield great returns and build stronger connections with the UNICEF brand, particularly among young people. The strategic leveraging of social listening insights to produce responsive digital content to respond to the needs of digital audiences especially with respect to the pandemic was a key approach that yielded results.

Given the urgent need to build the capacity of government and CSO partner investigation capacity, UNICEF established PSEA investigation LTAs during 2021. These are new to UNICEF and are made available to all UNICEF offices and UN agencies.

COVID-19 presented a significant risk to the health and wellbeing of staff. UNICEF personnel required to travel or work closely with communities to assist them in their COVID responses faced increased risks of exposure compared to full remote work modalities. These risks were mitigated through evidence-driven understanding of infection risks and prevention. Enhanced cooperation and communication between Headquarters, Regional Office and Country Office security teams during the crisis in Afghanistan helped ensure greater situational awareness, enabling the security team to be better prepared, anticipate evolving challenges or issues, respond rapidly and inform security decision-making.

**Innovations**

An innovative solution to dissemination of data was the redesigned UNICEF South Asia Data Pocketbook. This allows data presentation and visualization driven by the supplied data without in-built limitations on the number of administrative areas and indicators that can be handled. Another, innovation in the region involved working closely with Country Offices as peer support for the mAsset
Application and Property Survey Board (PSB) workflow tool to facilitate automation of asset management and reporting in VISION. The Regional Office also supported Afghanistan and Bhutan Country Offices in rolling out mAsset application.

The development of the All Children Learning Assessment Platform (ACLAP) substantially strengthened national capacities to measure learning and use assessments to improve learning. And it offered a range of dynamic assessment tools, including rapid self-analysis evaluation, online data visualization and mapping tools, plus resources to build teacher capacities.