Thematic funding is the most flexible source of financing and is critical to the implementation of system-wide programmes with longer-term impact. As a critical source of income for UNICEF programme delivery, thematic funding at global, regional and country level is allocated to support long-term planning and programme sustainability based on context and needs. It reduces costs and promotes efficiency and effectiveness to streamline programme management activities, from planning to reporting. It also allows the work of UNICEF to adapt to different contexts and needs. Thematic funding is critical to achieving sustainable results in different thematic areas, while also allowing UNICEF to target inequities and reach the most marginalized children, including girls, children living with disabilities and children living in fragile contexts.

Thematic funding allows donors the opportunity to pool funds to achieve impact at scale. Partner contributions to UNICEF’s thematic funding pools are in keeping with the principles of good multilateral resource partnerships. Thematic contributions have the greatest potential of ‘other resources’ to produce high-level results directly aligned to the Strategic Plan, as endorsed by UNICEF’s Executive Board, and supported by the aims of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. They yield a higher return on investment than more tightly earmarked contributions, because a larger percentage of funds go towards programming, with management and reporting costs lowered. They also simplify renewal and allocation procedures and reduce the administrative monitoring workload for partners.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was already facing a learning crisis: over 260 million children had never set foot in a classroom, and those in school did not necessarily learn and acquire skills required to succeed in school and life. The pandemic brought education systems across the world to a halt, with school closures affecting more than 1.6 billion learners at its peak. In the context of the global learning crisis, exacerbated by the pandemic and the learning losses resulting from school closures, thematic funding from UNICEF’s steadfast resource partners has proved key to unlocking concrete results for children.

Contributions to the Education thematic funding pool reached US$412.3 million over the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan period, with US$106.4 million received in 2021. Of all thematic education contributions that UNICEF received in 2018, a significant portion went to support education initiatives worldwide.
to 2021, 71 per cent were global-level contributions. These are the most flexible sources of funds to UNICEF after regular resources and can be allocated across regions to individual country programmes, according to priority needs. In 2021, 37 partners contributed thematic funds to education, compared to 33 partners in 2020. Sizeable thematic contributions were received from the Governments of Norway and Sweden for global Education thematic funds, and from the Government of Germany for education activities in Afghanistan. Norway’s generous contributions accounted for over 50 per cent of UNICEF’s global Education thematic funding received in 2021.

Education thematic funding expenditure in 2021

Since 2018, UNICEF has spent US$471 million in thematic funding on education (including US$108 million in emergencies). In 2021, the amount of education spending from thematic funds was nearly US$121 million, of which a quarter was emergency thematic funds. West and Central Africa (WCA) was the region with the highest spending on thematic funds, followed by the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA). These three regions account for 59 per cent of the total education spending from thematic funds. In 2021, the thematic funds expenditure (US$121 million) exceeded that of the previous year (US$90.3 million), and once again proved to be vital in addressing inequities in education.

FIGURE 3: Education thematic funding expenses (2018-2021)

FIGURE 4: Education thematic funding expenses, by activity type (2018-2021)
Thematic funding was particularly critical to low- and lower middle-income countries over the Strategic Plan period. Of the total contributions to thematic funds from global, regional and country level, the average share received by these countries was 79 per cent over the four years (43 per cent for low-income and 36 per cent for lower-middle income countries respectively). High income countries received only 2 per cent of the total amount. Thematic funds in these countries supported UNICEF’s function as a catalyst for domestic resources, for example by enabling UNICEF to contribute to the work of Local education groups (LEGs) and other sector planning processes that benefit all children, including the most marginalized.

Throughout the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan period, thematic funding for education has allowed UNICEF to achieve results at scale, particularly for the most marginalized children. The following examples demonstrate how thematic funding has allowed UNICEF to implement education programmes in different contexts, with agility and flexibility, particularly in response to emergencies, including the pandemic.

**Learning Assessment in India**

UNICEF supported India’s National Council of Educational Research and Training and Ministry of Human Resource Development to transform the national learning assessment system in 2018. UNICEF provided technical support in establishing a creditable National Achievement Survey to assess key competencies in language, mathematics and environmental studies (science and social science) in classes 3, 5 and 8 for more than 2.2 million children (52 per cent girls). Thematic funds were used to support capacity-building in all 701 districts across 36 states and union territories of India, to provide reliable information on learning for teacher professional development, the production of learning resource materials, and state- and district-level planning to improve learning.

**Evidence generation to support girls’ education, skills and training**

In 2018, ILO and UNICEF jointly published GirlForce, a report about the barriers young women everywhere face in the transition from education to the workforce. The report put forth several recommendations to improve programming for girls’ education, skills development and training, including the need for large-scale public and private sector programming for girls’ education, skills and market-relevant training; improved quality and relevance of teaching and learning to enable girls to develop the skills needed for life and work; and empower girls and young women to consider digital careers and increase their participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) learning.
Taking action on climate change in East Asia and the Pacific and in Viet Nam

East Asia and the Pacific is one of the regions that is most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with 1 billion people affected by floods, droughts and storms every year. In 2019, thematic funding allowed the East Asia and Pacific Regional Office to produce the study *It is Getting Hot: Call for Education Systems to Respond to the Climate Crisis*. The study focused on the complex impacts of the climate crisis on children’s education, including infrastructure damage, absenteeism and dropouts. It highlighted the need for education systems to adapt to become more protective, particularly of the most vulnerable. In Viet Nam, UNICEF launched a dialogue with the Ministry of Education and Training on working towards climate-smart education based on the findings of the study. The Ministry requested the co-creation of sustainable environment education packages integrating ‘green’ habits and skills into the new national curriculum and teacher training, benefiting 24 million students, and the development of a set of climate-smart education indicators for the new 2021–2030 Education Strategic Development Plan.

Supporting the Back to School and Safe Schools initiatives in Ghana

Through education thematic funding, UNICEF Ghana provided critical support to girls’ education and inclusive education throughout 2020. An adapted Safe Schools package, which includes elements of psychosocial support and guidance on preventing corporal punishment, sexual harassment and bullying, was finalized. More than 2,000 teachers, staff and personnel received training and support to roll out the Safe Schools initiative. UNICEF also supported the Government in its efforts to ensure girls and marginalized children returned to school after the COVID-19 disruptions through the roll-out of the national Back to School campaign across 16 regions, reaching 364,217 students (173,282 girls) in 6,400 communities.

Reaching girls and the most vulnerable in Niger

In 2020, UNICEF Niger used thematic funds to respond to the needs of girls and the most vulnerable children. In rural areas, 4,000 girls were equipped with tools and training for menstrual hygiene management and assertive leadership skills. The Nomadic Education Programme, which provides learning opportunities for children from nomad families while their families are away, allowed 2,854 children (1,264 girls) in regions neighbouring Algeria and Libya to continue learning.

Increasing access to quality education for children in humanitarian situations in Mali

In Mali, despite the insecurity in the country and ongoing school closures, UNICEF leveraged its position as the lead of the Education Cluster and as a member of the Local Education Group to support the Ministry of National Education to reach internally displaced children. Using thematic funding, UNICEF provided pre-primary schools and early childhood learning spaces with learning materials and supported parenting programmes to improve access to quality early childhood education for children aged 3–5 living in conflict-affected humanitarian settings. As a result, 45,336 children (22,427 girls) gained access to formal or non-formal basic education and the primary education completion rate increased from 47 per cent to 51.6 per cent. The lower secondary education completion rate increased from 32 per cent to 36.2 per cent. Similarly, the rate of out-of-school children of primary and lower secondary school age dropped from 39 per cent to 36.5 per cent.

Providing safe spaces for learning in Ethiopia

The *Bete* (‘My Home’ in Amharic) programme in Ethiopia, which was designed by UNICEF, is a joint education and child protection initiative aimed at providing a safe space for hard-to-reach out-of-school children, including internally displaced persons, refugees and children in host communities from ages 6 to 18, who live amid humanitarian emergencies. In 2021, the programme reached 92,016 children (47 per cent girls) with integrated accelerated learning, child protection and skills development.
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**Getting children back to school and remedial learning in the State of Palestine**

Through thematic funds, UNICEF provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Education in the State of Palestine, and collaborated with established local partners to respond to the education needs of conflict-affected children in Gaza. UNICEF supported remedial education for children in Grades 1 through 4 in 50 public schools. The schools that were selected had a higher concentration of marginalized children, had limited access to digital connectivity and few teachers. In the education districts of North Gaza, East Gaza, West Gaza, Easy Khan Younis and Rafah, 5,000 children (2,196 girls) completed the remedial learning classes.

UNICEF provided stationery kits to over 77,140 of the most vulnerable children (50 per cent girls) to mitigate their risk of dropping out of school, and supported rehabilitation of 20 damaged schools, providing a safe learning environment to 19,968 children (13,243 girls). UNICEF reached 54,971 children and adolescents (28,585 girls) with well-being, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). The flexibility of thematic funding enabled UNICEF to rapidly deploy these measures, get children back on track with their learning, and ensure they stayed in school following the reopening of schools in August 2021.

**Pakistan continuity of learning and Alternative Learning Pathways (ALP)**

Thematic funds were crucial in supporting Pakistan's COVID-19 education response. UNICEF worked with national and local education authorities to implement standard operating procedures and guidelines for continuity of learning. UNICEF trained 16,665 teachers (6,828 female) and education officials on safe reopening and operations of schools, benefiting approximately 650,000 students. In total, 22,772 teachers and education officials (10,254 female) were trained on MHPSS, enabling them to better support approximately 670,000 students (almost 300,000 girls) during the pandemic.

Moreover, UNICEF rolled out campaigns to advocate for continuity of learning during school closures, which reached 15 million people through social media and 587,341 parents through SMS, sharing messages on COVID-19 prevention, safe school operations, and encouraging continued participation in education. UNICEF also provided home-based learning materials to 211,112 disadvantaged children (106,231 girls) in Punjab and Sindh provinces to ensure continuity of learning during school closures.

With the use of thematic funds, the Alternative Learning Pathways programme was able to reach disadvantaged out-of-school children, reaching 9,673 marginalized students (5,842 girls) in Sindh province and 10,488 students (7,014 girls) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, UNICEF also helped establish an Implementation Unit to support systematized and efficient service delivery of the programme, including standard setting and accreditation to support learners' transition into the formal education system, and community mobilization sessions, mentoring sessions and teacher training for facilitators.
Funding UNICEF pro-equity education programmes through thematic funding is more important now than ever before

Now is the time for accelerating education recovery and transformative action to ensure that every child (particularly the most marginalized including girls, children with disabilities and children in fragile contexts) is fully supported in the key transitions of their learning journey: getting children ready for school, ensuring they have basic foundational numeracy and literacy, and they develop a full range of skills for adulthood. UNICEF is calling on partners to take urgent action to recover the learning losses by:

• Reaching every child,
• Assessing their learning,
• Prioritizing teaching the fundamentals,
• Increasing catch-up learning, and,
• Developing psychosocial health and wellbeing.

Despite the urgent need to recover the learning losses and prevent a learning catastrophe, there is an alarming lack of investment in education. On average, countries allocated only 3 per cent of their COVID-19 stimulus package to education. In low- and lower-middle-income countries, that figure is even less than 1 per cent. This is compounded by a decline in official development assistance (ODA) that fell from 8.8 per cent in 2019 to 5.5 per cent in 2020. The stakes are high. More than ever, UNICEF requires funding to recover and transform education and sustain its world-wide education programmes to support quality learning for every child.

UNICEF would like to thank its partners for their contributions for the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan period.

Partner testimonials

Access to education for children in crisis and conflict is a key priority for Norway. Our support to UNICEF’s Global Thematic Fund for Education helps to provide flexible funding for the goals set out in UNICEF’s strategic plan. Common focus areas include equitable access to learning opportunities, improved learning and skills for all, and improved learning and protection for children in emergency and fragile contexts. Norway attaches great importance to UNICEF’s commitments to provide education for the many children and young people who are still left behind. – Including refugees and internally displaced persons. Thematic funding enables UNICEF to adapt its work to different needs and contexts. This has been crucial in responding to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. And to other emergency situations around the world. I would like to commend UNICEF for its overall response to the education crisis in 2021. I am particularly pleased that UNICEF has focused on nutrition and the provision of food and water in its approach. As UN Deputy Secretary-General, Amina J. Mohammed, has said; ‘when children are hungry there is no stomach for learning’. Furthermore, I am pleased that UNICEF has incorporated school feeding as an integral part of education programming where this is possible.

Anne Beate Tveinereim, Minister of International Development, Norway (2022)

Improving access to quality basic social services is one of the four thematic priorities of Luxembourg’s development cooperation strategy. Providing quality education, as reflected in SDG4, is a cornerstone of Luxembourg’s commitment, and a prerequisite for giving children and young people the knowledge, skills and values to build their lives and contribute to their society. As such, Luxembourg has been a long-time supporter of UNICEF’s efforts aimed at safeguarding opportunities for children around the world and will continue to promote equal access to quality education for all.

Franz Fayot, Minister for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Affairs, Luxembourg (2022)

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1 For more information on thematic funding and how it works, please visit UNICEF’s thematic funding page.
2 The allocation and expenditure of all thematic funding contributions can be monitored on the UNICEF transparency portal and the results achieved with the funds reported across the suite of UNICEF’s Global annual results reports. For further information and data, please visit: https://open.unicef.org/
3 UNICEF (2022). Where are we on education recovery?