Section 1: Update on the Context and Trends that Influenced 2021 Priorities

During 2021, children around the world continued to experience the effects of multiple, overlapping crises, including conflicts, public health emergencies and climate change, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities, threatening progress towards the SDGs and depriving them of their rights.

Within the context, UNICEF Programme Group drove organization-wide programme excellence to accelerate progress towards the targets of the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2018-2021. Programme Group also played a key role shaping the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025, with a clear focus on achieving outcomes for children, especially those furthest behind, through the application transformative strategies and leveraging partnerships.

In order to optimize its contribution to driving organizational effectiveness in reaching the most vulnerable children, Programme Group undertook a significant repositioning of its business model, building on the recommendations of organizational improvement initiatives undertaken in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The new business model of Programme Group aims to enhance UNICEF’s global programmatic leadership, consisting of: global thought leadership; quality support to results at country level with the best available evidence of what works; and the leveraging of partnerships and platforms in a way that supports UNICEF’s recognized leadership and unique contribution.

Section 2: Major Contributions and Drivers of Results

Across Programme Group, Programme Teams and cross-cutting Global Leads projected thought leadership, delivered quality support to regional and country teams and influenced global partnerships in favour of child rights.

These efforts involved, in part, shaping and giving impetus to Global Technical Teams and Multi-Functional Task Teams, aimed at drawing upon UNICEF global expertise to develop holistic, multi-sector and multi-specialty solutions to key issues constraining progress towards results for children related to the Goal Areas of the UNICEF Strategic Plan.

Goal Area 1: Every Child Survives and Thrives

Select key contributions of Programme Group to driving programme excellence leading up to 2021 included:

Global Thought Leadership

- Heightening emphasis on Primary Health Care, including through the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025, with a particular emphasis on reaching the children furthest behind, epitomized by those beyond the reach of essential social services (‘zero-dose children and communities’), as entry points for building sustainable health systems, with efforts to end HIV/AIDS more fully integrated into the primary health care systems.
• Shaping global priorities and strategies, notably the Immunization Agenda 2030 and Gavi 5.0 - the five-year strategy of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance - including through the use of integrated, multi-year research and systematic knowledge management with an equity focus.
• Conduct of an investment analysis of immunization for children in fragile and conflict settings.
• Launch of the first flagship child nutrition report “Fed to Fail?”, highlighting the crisis of children’s diets in early childhood and shaping global strategic direction regarding food systems for children.
• Issuance of a UNICEF position paper on Famine Prevention and Mitigation, in line with the UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020-2030. The paper calls for a holistic approach to famine prevention whereby UNICEF will advocate for and support policies, strategies and programmes to protect and fulfill the nutrition rights of children and women affected by humanitarian crises. To take forward these commitments, Programme Group took part in establishing an internal famine task force.

Support to Country Results

• Engagement in global health programme oversight in collaboration with Regional Offices, especially for crisis-affected countries, including through global network meetings and regular HQ-regional coordination exercises.
• Strategic direction, allocation and oversight of Global Health and Global Nutrition Thematic Funding and catalytic funding.
• Global talent management, timely recruitment of strategic positions and ensuring a fit for purpose health workforce, including through the development of talent pools, HQ and RO transition management, and e-learning and knowledge sharing systems.
• Coordination of UNICEF global technical support to COs for preparedness and response to public health emergencies (PHE), including through surge deployments, integrated outbreak analytics, integration of PHE into the UNICEF Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action and development of a PHE toolkit for country teams.
• Issuance of programme guidance and provision of support to over 100 COs, in support to the roll-out of the UNICEF Nutrition Strategy (2020-2030), on early prevention, and treatment of child wasting; nutrition of school age children; and large scale food fortification.
• To support the strengthening of the legislative environment around nutrition, Programme Group engaged in the production of a series of legal guidance documents including on the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and International Trade, a Parliamentarian Handbook on Food Systems and Nutrition and an Internal Guidance on Regulatory Framework to tackle childhood overweight and obesity.
• Technical assistance to government-led projects to validate the acceptability and feasibility of delivering oral Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis to the most at-risk adolescents, using multifaceted delivery approaches, especially peer-mediated, public sector-led, private provider networks, and digital approaches.
• Support to point-of-care early infant diagnosis in 20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including through technical assistance, testing of commodities and community engagement.

Leveraging Partnerships and Platforms
• Coordinating resource mobilization for high quality funding for health and maintaining an up-to-date health programme engagement strategy for key resource partners, in collaboration with UNICEF’s Public Partnership and Private Fundraising and Partnerships Divisions, though health funding remained heavily earmarked by donors.

• Strong technical leadership in COVAX.

• Sustained global role in longstanding areas of UNICEF leadership (e.g. immunization) and emerging leadership in new areas (e.g. non-communicable diseases, mental health, injuries), including through evidence driven advocacy and flagship publications and events (e.g. State of the World’s Children; World Health Summit; G20; UN General Assembly).

• Steering partners towards better understanding and addressing the immunization and children in urban settings, through an urban immunization toolkit developed through the Urban Immunization Working Group.

• UNICEF’s vision and agenda on food systems for children was launched at the Food Systems Summit and over US$27 billion in commitments were pledged for maternal and child nutrition (including from lower middle income countries) upon the Nutrition for Growth Summit.

• As the lead agency of the Global Breastfeeding Collective, UNICEF focused its advocacy efforts on skilled breastfeeding counselling, one of the Collective’s policy asks in 2020 and a key priority for programme countries.

• Development of the Global Action Plan on Child Wasting, jointly by FAO, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, commissioned by the UN Secretary-General. This key product related to early detection and treatment of child wasting has guided the development of 23 country roadmaps for its implementation.

Goal Area 2: Every Child Learns
Select key contributions of Programme Group to driving programme excellence leading up to 2021 included:

Global Thought Leadership

• Influencing and shaping global priorities related to education, including through the development of the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025, with a focus on three critical milestones in childhood (readiness for school by age 5; acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy by age 10; engaged and ready for life and work by age 18) and three cross-cutting priorities (provision of education in emergencies; digital learning; gender, equity and inclusion in education).

• Evidence generation for advocacy, including knowledge and evidence products on: joint country responses to COVID-19 (UNICEF-UNESCO-World Bank-OECD); Transforming Education in Africa report (UNICEF-African Union); State of the Education Crisis report (UNICEF-UNESCO-World Bank); Gender Transformative Education brief; 10 publications in the International Journal of Educational Development; and 48 case studies developed and disseminated to COs.

Support to Country Results

• Developing and disseminating more than 25 global goods to support the COVID-19 response and recovery, with a special focus on foundational literacy and numeracy.
• Fostering organization-wide knowledge sharing and use, through publication of case studies, launch of a knowledge management dashboard, and multi-pronged initiatives to improve knowledge of mental health and psycho-social support programming in education.
• Driving organizational focus on early childhood education through strengthening education systems policy, governance and teaching-learning environment in 40 countries, enabling them to consider bold choices for scaling-up pre-primary education.
• Roll-out of Learning Passport, reaching 2 million users in 20 countries.

Leveraging Partnerships and Platforms

• Engaging in the organization of marketplace events focused on world class digital learning solutions, for E9 countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan) representing over half of the world’s population and some of the largest education systems in the world, and for 24 West and Central Africa countries.
• High-level advocacy involving partners and donors, galvanizing commitments towards such priorities as school reopening, child and adolescent participation, and girls’ education.
• Putting education on the agenda of key global events, including meetings of the G7 and G20, the GPE Global Education Summit, the UN General Assembly, the Gender Equality Forum, the 26th Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 26), including engaging young people, and the RewirEd Summit.

Goal Area 3: Every Child is Protected from Violence and Exploitation
Select key contributions of Programme Group to driving programme excellence leading up to 2021 included:

Global Thought Leadership

• Shaping a strategic shift in the global approach to child protection through a focus on prevention, including through the development of the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and the UNICEF Child Protection Strategy 2021-2030.
• Positioning key priorities and strategies related to child protection among global actors, through publications, reports and guidance related to reimagining justice for children, child protection systems strengthening, ending online child sexual exploitation and abuse, mental health and psycho-social support, children on the move, female genital mutilation and child protection in humanitarian action.

Support to Country Results

• Continuously and consistently working with COs to provide hands-on technical assistance and to ground global guidance.
• Expert support and deployments to countries affected by emergencies requiring a Level-2 and Level-3 humanitarian response (e.g. Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Syria).
• Orchestrating a whole-of-organization response for unaccompanied and separated children in Afghanistan.
• Fostering uptake and use of Primero – an open-source case management web application that helps social service providers coordinate critical support to vulnerable children – leading to an increase in the number of countries harnessing the potential of this digital global public good from 38 to 51.
• Working through global networks for the provision of social services support to over 45,000 highly vulnerable children following their release from detention.
• Engaging with Regional and Country Offices in analyzing, prioritizing and strategizing fit-for-purpose, impactful child protection components of new Country Programmes of Cooperation.
• The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) dashboard on the protection of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), developed and managed through the support of UNICEF Programme Group, became a central resource for humanitarian actors globally, attracting 80,000 users. The PSEA dashboard tracks inter-agency, collective progress on PSEA across countries with a humanitarian response, and makes technical support and resources available to field practitioners. Further, together with the UN Secretariat, UNFPA, UNHCR and IOM, UNICEF led the development of a Technical Note on the Implementation of the UN Protocol on the Provision of Assistance to Victims of SEA, which provides guidance on victim assistance for women and children to leaders and practitioners in field settings.

Leveraging Partnerships and Platforms

• Mobilization of global actors around child protection-related Sustainable Development Goals, including through: the Child marriage Joint Monitoring Mechanism; donor partnerships on female genital mutilation; Parenting, Pathfinding and Safe to Learn initiatives pursued through the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children; the WeProtect Global Alliance to galvanize efforts to protect children from online sexual exploitation and abuse; the UN Legal Identity Agenda with an emphasis on birth registration; heightened advocacy during the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour with the International Labour Organization (ILO); and the UNHCR-UNICEF Blueprint for Joint Action for Refugee Children.

Goal Area 4: Every Child Lives in a Safe and Clean Environment

Select key contributions of Programme Group to driving programme excellence leading up to 2021 included:

Global Thought Leadership

• Shaping global water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) priorities, including through the development of the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025, with an emphasis on achieving water security for all by ensuring safe and accessible water services for all, climate resilient WASH services, preventing water scarcity and supporting water cooperation to enhance social cohesion.
• Framing the climate crisis as a child rights crisis in global discourse, through the launch of the Children’s Climate Risk Index, which assesses the likelihood of climate and environmental shocks or stresses leading to the erosion of child developmental progress, the deepening of deprivations and humanitarian situations affecting children.
• Launching the State of the World’s Hygiene Report as a global call to action to make hand hygiene a priority in policy and practice.
• Shedding light on the role of water in conflicts around the world, through the dissemination of the fourth volume of Water Under Fire, which advocates in favor of halting attacks on water and sanitation infrastructure and personnel, building resilient WASH services that can be sustained in emergencies, and linking life-saving humanitarian action and investments in sustainable water and sanitation systems.

Support to Country Results

• Supporting regional and country teams to conduct water vulnerability analysis in line with the emphasis on water security for all.
• Integration of child WASH issues into the UN Resilience Guide and the UN Guidance on Integrating Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation in the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework.
• Rolling out capacity building resources on WASH financing and on gender-responsive programming in WASH, as well as a suite of WASH-in-health care facilities costing tools among COs.
• Provision of surge support, participation in emergency response teams and close-proximity remote support to countries experiencing emergencies, such as Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Greece and Yemen.
• Developing a UNICEF infection-prevention control strategy and roadmap in collaboration with the World Health Organization.
• Formulation of guidance on data collection, monitoring and reporting related to children with disabilities in WASH.

Leveraging Partnerships and Platforms

• Launch of the Hand Hygiene for All initiative, as a call to action for all of society to achieve universal access to hand hygiene. The initiative brings together international partners, national governments, public and private sectors, and civil society to ensure that affordable products and services are available, especially among the most disadvantaged children, and to enable a culture of hygiene.
• Fostering and facilitating WASH-focused adolescent and youth engagement, including during the President of the UN General Assembly’s high-level meeting water, the Water Dialogues for Results convened by the Government of Germany, the Forum for Children and Youth (CY21) and European Development Days.
• Featuring of child-sensitive nationally determined contributions to climate change mitigation at COP 26.
• Enabling countries to unlock financing opportunities through the submission of readiness proposals to the Green Climate Fund and further climate resource mobilization initiatives with the UN Development Programme and the Global Water Partnership.
Goal Area 5: Every Child has an Equitable Chance in Life

Select key contributions of Programme Group to driving programme excellence leading up to 2021 included:

**Global Thought Leadership**

- Strengthening global recognition that addressing child poverty and building inclusive social protection systems constitute game changers for children, including by positioning these issues within a dedicated Goal Area of the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

- Issuing a Call to Action for Financing an Inclusive Recovery for Children, which advocated for safeguarding critical social spending following the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring the effective and efficient use of financial resources, and deploying additional international and domestic financing options.

- Jointly with the World Bank, publication of a report on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Welfare of Households with Children. The report showed that the effects of the pandemic have disproportionately affected vulnerable segments of the population, including children and their families, and that the modest progress made in reducing child poverty has been reversed in all parts of the world by COVID-19.

- Issuance of the UNICEF Gender Policy 2021-2030 and Gender Action Plan 2022-2025, including a quantified monitoring framework, built on a country-focused, participatory and evidence-based exercise. The policy and plan articulate UNICEF’s commitments to promoting gender equality across programmes, workplaces and practices around the world.

**Support to Country Results**

- Moving towards global programmatic coherence of humanitarian cash transfers and social protection systems in fragile and emergency contexts.

- Steering the organization towards becoming a lead actor in the social protection pillar of COVID-19 response in 115 countries.

- Guiding COs towards a more integrated approach to local governance, urban programming and the Child Friendly Cities initiative.

- Review of policy use of multidimensional poverty measures and production of a monetary child poverty guidance.

- As part of the UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities joint programme, Programme Group supported countries to design and implement disability inclusive response and recovery planning for COVID-19. Programme Group finalized a catalogue of mobile applications to support access to COVID-19 prevention and response, that were tested for accessibility and relevance to children with disabilities and their caregivers. Programme Group supported countries to address the needs of children with disabilities in humanitarian action through training and dissemination of a toolkit to accompany existing guidance.

- Issuing the UNICEF Parenting of Adolescents Guidance, which guides country efforts to build on parents’ existing strengths by equipping them with developmentally-appropriate skills and strategies to meet their adolescent children’s needs.
• Developing the Young People’s Participation and Mental Health protocol, aimed at safeguarding the mental health and psychosocial well-being of young people in participation processes, to ensure their meaningful participation across programming, research, advocacy and communications.

• Shaping and supporting the roll-out of the IASC Guidelines on Working with and for Young People in Humanitarian and Protracted Crises.

Leveraging Partnerships and Platforms

• Development of the UNDP-UNICEF Global Flagship on Financing, identifying critical financing gaps for the SDGs and children at country level, and leveraging public and private expertise to close these gaps.

• Positioning children prominently in the Global Urban Monitoring Framework through the integration of child-focused indicators, with UN-Habitat, and in the World Social Protection Report, with ILO.

• Engaging as a steering committee member of the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection to Achieve the SDGs (USP 2030), co-leading the working group on food systems/social protection.

• Scale-up of the Skills4Girls Portfolio, including country support, through advocacy and partnership with private sector partners including Chloé, Clé de Peau Beauté, Dove and Pandora. The Skills4Girls Portfolio works with and for girls in 22 countries to bridge the gap between the skills girls need to be competitive in the 21st century workforce and those they have traditionally had access to.

• Strengthening UNICEF’s partnership with the Government of Norway on disability inclusion, notably in shaping the second Global Disability Summit that took place in early 2022 – including a Global Disability Youth Summit – with the Governments of Norway and Ghana and the International Disability Alliance. The summit was a mechanism for collecting new, ambitious, and widespread commitments which are critical to achieving real change for persons with disabilities, in line with the ambitions of the SDGs and the obligations under the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

Section 3: Lessons Learned and Innovations

Repositioning Programme Group to better drive global programme excellence: While UNICEF is globally recognized for its ability to deliver results at country level, even in the most complex situations, UNICEF can become even more successful in shaping the global agenda and being the go-to organization for excellence in analysis, programmatic and thought leadership, and to influence the development and roll-out of innovative solutions at a global scale. Programme Group can enable the organization to fulfill its potential in these respects through more autonomous, empowered accountable programme leads, combined with streamlined and agile planning processes.

The transformation of global programme networks into Global Technical Teams can become a central driving and unifying force for UNICEF global programming, by federating expertise across the organization around a common agenda, grounded in concrete, time-bound deliverables, thereby minimizing duplications and dis-alignments of efforts.
Programme Group’s response to COVID-19 showed the importance of programme partnerships and adaptive and agile programming to delivering an effective emergency response. Programme Teams’ investment in establishing global partnerships and coordination platforms in recent years, including in the humanitarian sphere, was critical to creating the momentum for unified advocacy and rapid delivery of technical guidance to guide programming at the global, regional and national levels. Empowering programme leads to find the most efficient course of action in a quickly evolving context, allows for better quality, more demand-driven global support to countries.

Alongside UNICEF humanitarian response in line with its Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, renewed focus on prevention and risk-informed programming is essential. Addressing drivers of fragility, investing in conflict prevention and supporting peacebuilding are essential in fragile and conflict-affected countries, which are home to many of the furthest behind children.

The continued effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 highlighted the crucial importance of investing in strengthening the resilience of community-level services, both through direct support to communities themselves and capacity strengthening of front-line workers such as community health workers. Well-equipped front-line workers help communities to withstand, adapt and respond to the effects of shocks and stresses, alongside the efforts of governments. Similarly, caregivers and children who practice child-friendly behaviors and promote child-friendly social norms – with the support of social and behavior change interventions – are in a better position to sustain child health, nutrition, development, learning and protection, even when crises occur.

Looking Forward to 2022: As UNICEF embarks on achieving the results of its Strategic Plan 2022-2025, Programme Group will build on the successes and challenges of 2021 and take forward the lessons set out in this report. Through the projection of thought leadership, the delivery of quality support to regional and country teams and influencing global partnerships in favour of child rights, Programme Group will embody UNICEF’s unwavering commitment to the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.