Update on the context and situation of children

The start of the new Country Programme 2022–2026 comes at a critical time, when simultaneous and interconnected shocks at global, regional and national levels are impacting children hardest. The mandate and commitment of both the government and UNICEF to fulfil children’s rights continue to be challenged by the need to regain learning loss, close health gaps – especially in immunization – foster climate resilience, address rising mental health concerns, reduce violence against children in all its forms and tackle growing undernutrition and inequities.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, Belize was reclassified by the World Bank from an upper-middle- to a lower-middle-income country in 2020. However, the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) has rebounded significantly, growing by 8.5% in 2021 and 12.8% in the third quarter of 2022. In the government’s ‘reopening’ of the country in 2021, it prioritized increased investment to expand growth opportunities within the blue and green economies and restructure sovereign debt by leveraging its coastal and marine resources. This has contributed to returning Belize to its prior classification as an upper-middle-income country.

The preliminary results of the 2022 Labour Force Survey reveal an unemployment rate of 5%, a decrease from 8.2% in 2021, with increased employment in call centres, tourism and manufacturing. However, this survey only focuses on people actively looking for jobs.

According to the 2018-2019 Household Budget Survey, 60% of children aged 0–14 years lived in poor households, of which 12% are extremely poor. Though there are no new data on child poverty, the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 has heightened the risk of multidimensional deprivations among children. Yet social protection coverage remains low, with only 11% of children covered by social protection programmes, and fewer than 10% of children aged below 4 years with access to national health insurance.

The government’s Medium-Term Development Strategy 2022–2026 prioritizes investment in poverty reduction, economic transformation and growth, reducing the trade deficit, improving citizens’ security, protecting the environment and stopping corruption. Additionally, the government is embarking on its second constitutional review process since independence in 1981, with the passage of the People’s Constitution Commission Act in October 2022, becoming the latest Commonwealth Caribbean State to commit to a comprehensive process of constitutional reform.

Positioning children’s rights in the national agenda with solid evidence to inform policy, strengthen systems and co-create innovative approaches to drive results for children was therefore central to UNICEF’s first year of the programme implementation.

To address some of the critical data gaps and concerns for children, several studies and analyses were conducted in 2022. Belize ranks 96th out of 146 countries in the 2022 Global Gender Gap Index, and 21st out of 22 in the Latin America and Caribbean region. The report highlights those patterns of exclusion.

for girls and women in Belize are linked to factors such as age, place of residence, sex, gender (the LGBTQI+ community), health status (people living with HIV) and minority or marginalized status, including people with disabilities. These have serious implications for the rights and well-being of children. Hence, UNICEF engaged in a comprehensive gender programme review and strategy formulation to contribute to addressing the root causes of gender inequality and support national gender-transformative efforts.
With the last nutrition study in Belize conducted in 2011, UNICEF – in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Wellness (MoHW) and United Nations agencies – undertook a study to understand the low levels of exclusive breastfeeding and transitional nutrition, especially within the first 1,000 days. Preliminary results highlight key barriers to infant and child nutrition, including social norms, lack of family support, and postnatal mental health issues. Additionally, Belize continues to be impacted by evolving food crises. The recent World Food Programme (WFP) Caribbean Food Security and Livelihoods Survey report indicates that food inflation in Belize stands at 6.1% over the year.

Face-to-face instruction in schools returned in September 2022, hence accelerated action to catch up on learning loss caused by the pandemic was critical. The World Bank–UNICEF joint report ‘The State of Global Learning Poverty 2022’ reveals the devastating impact of school closures on learning loss across the region, setting learning outcomes back by more than a decade. According to the report, Belize is one of the 10 countries with the highest school closure index. Scaling up connectivity for digital transformation, curriculum reform relevant to the twenty-first century and accompanying teacher training will require significant investment in the coming year.

Despite the limited data on migrant children, substantial progress was made, with UNICEF signing the second Joint Migration Action Plan with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which also supported the 2022 National Amnesty Programme.

Additionally, UNICEF – in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO) – supported the government in the development of a Child Labour Policy and Strategy 2022–2025, with an ambitious goal of eradicating the worst forms of child labour by 2025. The government recognizes the limited availability of data regarding children’s economic activities and child labour in Belize, noting the issue is not negligible.

Over the last two years the frequency and scope of climate-related natural disasters are on the increase with more destructive effects. Of the 14 tropical storms in 2022, Belize City was worst affected by Hurricane Lisa, with over 5,000 houses either partially or completely destroyed. In the aftermath of Hurricane Lisa, the first ever Post-Disaster Needs Assessment is being conducted in collaboration with the government.

Despite some of challenges related to increasing migration, the impact of climate change, food inflation and insecurity, important opportunities remain for advancing children’s rights. With the expansion of the United Nations System presence in Belize, UNICEF benefited from improved collaboration with agencies through joint resource mobilization and programme implementation. Similarly, opportunities for strengthened and expanded partnerships with subregional and regional partners such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Central American Integration System (SICA), as well as with civil society organizations (CSOs), the private sector, international financial institutions (IFIs) and academia were also explored.

**Major contributions and drivers of results**

In 2022, UNICEF continued to leverage and strengthen partnerships with the government, United Nations agencies, CSOs and the private sector, scale up programme implementation and position UNICEF as a partner of choice. This enabled the delivery of integrated development results and ensured continued preparedness for and response to existing and evolving emergencies, including COVID-19, Hurricane Lisa and the growing migration crisis for children.
Refining the data ecosystem for children
Within the new Country Programme, UNICEF aims to bolster the national capacity for evidence-based policies, enhance evaluation systems, improve quality child-friendly services and accelerate social behaviour change (SBC) for vulnerable populations to drive results for children. In 2022, over US$500,000 was invested in refining the data ecosystem for children, specifically around childhood nutrition, health, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), protection and parenting.

The first ever Government of Belize and UNICEF joint evaluation of the child protection system was initiated, marking a critical milestone in assessing the existing structures and procedures to provide care and guarantee the right to protection for Belize’s children. UNICEF – in collaboration with the government and United Nations agencies – conducted a nutrition study on the first 1,000 days of life to understand the low levels of exclusive breastfeeding and transitional nutrition. Initial findings of the study reveal the need for investment in SBC around the feeding practices of caregivers and scaling up the Baby-Friendly Initiative to include complementary feeding. UNICEF also supported the government in finalizing the indicators to be included in the first national multidimensional poverty index. Additionally, the findings of the 2021 Child Poverty Study were presented to national partners, including the government, IFIs and academia, contributing to the national dialogue on measuring and reducing child poverty. Plans are under way for the next Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey to be conducted in 2023.

Advancing a resilient and responsive primary health-care system
Significant progress was made in building a resilient and responsive primary health-care system. Critical investment was made in strengthening cold chain, enhancing equipment, integrating zero-dose vaccination programmes, building the capacities of health personnel and generating evidence. In collaboration with the Supply Division, the UNICEF Country Office (CO) analysed cold chain systems, which resulted in all domestic refrigerators and thermometers being replaced with modern biomedical equipment in over 60% of health facilities countrywide.

Additionally, over 650 (46%) health personnel from 47 of the 57 health facilities were trained in quality improvement, benefiting 8,000 mothers and over 6,340 children with an increased immunization rate of 88% in 2022, up from 71.5% in 2021. UNICEF’s technical and financial support contributed to the development of the maternal, neonatal and child health quality improvement framework and the establishment of the first ever Quality Improvement Unit in all district hospitals in the country. In addition, the CO supported the MoHW in the costed analysis of rice fortification as the most strategic public health intervention to decrease micronutrient deficiencies, particularly in children and women. The results will support a draft Cabinet Paper for rice fortification and intensify advocacy for the related policy. Furthermore, the MoHW and UNICEF launched the Adolescent Health National Strategic Plan 2030 in September, prioritizing 11 critical pillars, including provisions to address mental health, nutrition and participation among adolescents. The national rollout of the strategy will strengthen the ongoing collaboration with the ministries of education, youth and human development for the inclusion of psychosocial support in schools and child-friendly spaces (both online and offline).

Promoting a shock-responsive social protection system
UNICEF Belize’s progress in contributing to an inclusive, equitable and shock-responsive social protection system was noteworthy in 2022. It included a ground-breaking shift in the provision of cash-based support to over 900 children from migrant families at no cost to beneficiaries. This innovative digital payment approach, with DigiWallet as the financial service provider, is a major milestone in enhancing the national social protection system and contributing to the timely disbursement of cash transfers. Additionally, initial analysis and a desk review were completed in preparation for the development of the National Social Protection Strategy, a costed Social Protection Floor and the National Coordination Mechanism on Social Protection through the Resilient Belize Joint SDG Fund programme. UNICEF was also instrumental in contributing to the government’s efforts to establish a
national multidimensional poverty index for the country.

Transforming education across the life cycle
UNICEF supported the government and key stakeholders to close learning gaps, bridge the digital divide and improve connectivity. Policy advocacy and technical assistance for Reimagining Early Childhood Development (ECD) remained a priority in 2022, with continued engagement with the four key ministries of health, education, human development and economic development; increased investment in the implementation of the National ECD Strategic Plan 2022–2030; and expanding access for the home visiting programme to promote a nurturing care framework for safe and healthy children.

UNICEF was instrumental in leveraging an important partnership for early childhood education between the Government of Belize, Mission 4.7 and Think Equal, launched at the Transforming Education Summit. The initiative aims to deliver a comprehensive and holistic programme to equip preschool children with the foundational skills necessary for social and emotional learning. The programme, which will be rolled out through a phased approach, will be adopted in every Infant 1 and Infant 2 classroom across the country. Furthermore, technical support was provided in the drafting of the revised national nutrition and school feeding policies to be completed in 2023. Steering committees included technical officers from the health and WASH sectors.

Although notable efforts have been made by education stakeholders in Belize to adapt to the new realities, there are still a myriad of issues that need to be addressed to ensure movement towards a post-pandemic learning environment that emphasizes children’s cognitive, physical and psychosocial needs. With the fully costed Belize Education Sector Plan 2021–2025, which serves as a compass through the unchartered waters of COVID-19 learning recovery, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MoECST) launched the new National Curriculum Framework in 2022. The MoECST, with technical assistance from UNICEF, convened a National Curriculum Reform Steering Committee to develop a national curriculum framework to guide the creation of new syllabuses from preschool to secondary school. The framework recognizes the reality of curriculum overload and the need for improved learning outcomes relevant to the twenty-first century and emphasizes the value of competency-based education from preschool to tertiary education.

As a complement to the national curriculum reform, there is ongoing development of competency-based unit plans and assessments, utilizing authentic student-centred pedagogies such as inquiry, discovery, problem-solving and cooperative, experiential and project-based learning. In Reimagining Education, within UNICEF’s GIGA Connectivity Program, the CO and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) are supporting the government to radically scale up digital learning solutions for the most marginalized children and adolescents. Innovative partnerships with the Global Partnership for Education – with UNICEF as Coordinating Agency in support of the transforming education agenda – have been initiated, with roll-out anticipated during the first half of 2023.

Furthermore, UNICEF continued to support the MoECST in 2022 with capacity-building on the new, innovative Teacher Learning Institute (TLI) launched in 2021. The TLI provides structured, comprehensive, year-round professional development programmes based on identified needs of teachers and school leaders. Over 500 teachers nationwide benefited from courses on WASH, psychosocial support, literacy interventions and digital pedagogy. The platform is now used as a quick, practical way for teachers to track their own hours of continuous professional development – a necessary part of the licensing process for teachers in Belize.

UNICEF additionally strengthened gender-transformative programming with key partners such as the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), Raise Me Up, the MoECST and the Ministry of Youth Sports and Transportation (MOYST). Over 25 adolescent girls and women were certified in non-traditional courses for women, to be able to work in male-dominated fields such as public service
Strengthening policy frameworks and the social workforce for child protection
Progress was made in further strengthening the child protection system to prevent and respond to the continued increase in violence against children, gender-based violence, child labour, early union, and children in contact with the law. Aligned with the National Children’s Agenda, the Child Justice Action Plan and the Road Map to End Child Marriage and Early Union, considerable investment was made in strengthening the social workforce, empowering CSOs and engaging with key stakeholders, including faith-based organizations and the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus.

The National Child Justice Steering Committee successfully completed the third year of implementation of the Child Justice Action Plan. The Committee supported implementation of multi-agency coordination procedures, initiated the drafting of a child interaction policy, established two additional child-friendly spaces in police stations, and gained significant traction related to advocacy for comprehensive legal reform for child justice legislation to better support and protect children in conflict with the law. The Committee also continued rolling out the Child Protection and Gender modules in the security forces training and judicial education curricula, all geared towards diverting children in conflict with the law away from formal judicial proceedings to community-based support, such as counselling, treatment for drug abuse, and social skills training. Around 200 officials benefited from the roll-out in 2022.

UNICEF continued to advocate for family-based alternatives to institutional care, including for migrant children. To this end, UNICEF supported implementation of the protocol to support unaccompanied and accompanied migrant and refugee children, as well as provided psychosocial support and access to legal aid. This protocol has been endorsed by the government and sets the strategic direction for working with children on the move, aligned with international standards. Also, in close collaboration with ILO, UNICEF supported the government in the development and launch of the Child Labour Policy and National Action Plan. The Action Plan provides documented commitments to remove all ambiguities in the Labour Act on what constitutes child labour, harmonize the definition of ‘a child’ across legislation, and establish clear inter-agency communication and data-sharing protocols on cases of child labour.

Support to migration and the national amnesty agenda
Several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have undergone considerable population change over the last decade, with the largest proportional population changes occurring in Central America. Belize has had the greatest percentage change, with its population increasing by 24% between 2009 and 2019, with migrants from Haiti, China and Africa adding to those from neighbouring countries. The CO has successfully supported the government’s response to migration, particularly, the National Amnesty Programme 2022, the third of such programmes since the country’s independence in 1981. The programme has provided an opportunity for UNICEF and other United Nations agencies to strengthen their support to ensuring the rights of migrants, improving their access to basic social services and fostering social cohesion with host communities. Since the launch in August, UNICEF, IOM and UNHCR have supported the preparation of applications for over 6,600 people for submission at various mobile hubs across the country. UNICEF has concurrently provided support to migrants and host communities through social services and protection, including cash transfers. Given the low number of people registered for the amnesty process according to government estimates, UNICEF, IOM and UNHCR advocated for an extension of the programme in November, contributing to a three-month extension of the application period.

Promoting civic engagement
Strategic engagement with CSOs focused on increasing their knowledge to effectively respond to and support children and women experiencing or at risk of violence, introducing new policies and procedures, such as victim assistance and compliance with guidance on prevention of sexual
exploitation and abuse. These engagements also included increasing awareness of child protection legislation and the availability of essential services at subnational levels and identifying community advocates and supporting their capacity development. Another key area of focus was to strengthen partnerships with the government and CSOs, utilizing various platforms for bilateral engagement to address the gaps and barriers for reaching the most vulnerable children and communities. Similarly, UNICEF facilitated key engagements between children/adolescents and policymakers on education recovery and relevance as part of the consultations for the Transforming Education Summit and the third National Children’s Parliament; on climate change as part of COP27; and on child poverty as a contribution to the child poverty study and the development of the national multidimensional poverty index.

**Positioning the humanitarian–development–peace nexus**

In 2022, support from the UNICEF Office of Emergency Programmes (EMOPS) and multi-country WASH in Emergency support were instrumental in ensuring effective preparedness and response to Hurricane Lisa in collaboration with City Emergency Management Offices and the National Commission for Families and Children. Key elements of UNICEF’s humanitarian strategy were implemented to ensure the provision of safe water, hygiene kits and proper sanitation for children, adolescents, and women, in collaboration with partners. The supply of 30 water tanks to 15 schools and 15 migrant communities contributed to access to safe water, reaching over 12,500 beneficiaries, including children.

The first ever Post-Disaster Needs Assessment was requested by the government for support from the United Nations Country Team covering six critical pillars, including social, productive, infrastructure, macro-economic and human impact, and cross-cutting considerations such as gender and minorities. It is expected to be finalized by the end of January 2023.

**Social behaviour change (SBC) and communication**

An important investment this year has been the conduct of a comprehensive SBC review to determine the relevance, efficiency and sustainability of SBC activities in programme interventions by UNICEF and partners during the last Country Programme. The review will inform the development of a comprehensive SBC strategy for the next four years in support of key behaviour and social change objectives that affect the rights and well-being of children. The CO benefitted from technical and funding support through the Early Adopters –EVAC initiative, which was instrumental in assessing social listening on issues related to violence and other harmful practices that impact children.

UNICEF maintained a high level of visibility for children in its communication activities. The increased youth participation and the leverage of non-traditional partners reinforced the impact of advocacy and communications actions in positioning UNICEF as leading voice and advocate for children. Programme and CO advocacy priorities included learning recovery and education transformation; migration and the National Amnesty Programme 2022; COVID-19 response and recovery; violence, including gender-based violence; and climate change, including COP27. Public advocacy also supported adolescent health, including mental health and participation, social and child protection and parenting. The CO grew its on-line presence to our newly established spaces, such as Instagram and LinkedIn complementing our engagement on Facebook, Twitter and Tik Tok. Additionally, we also updated our CO website with efforts to scale up visits in 2022.
Important gains were made in global partnerships in the education sector, including collaboration with Think Equal and Mission 4.7 led by the Ban Ki-Moon Centre for Global Citizens, for support to early childhood education covering all Infant 1 and Infant 2 classes in the country; a partnership with the UNICEF Office of Innovation and the International Telecommunication Union for the GIGA project on school connectivity; and with GPE on curriculum reform and teacher training.

Partnership with IFIs progressed through the joint design and roll-out of a Quality Improvement module and data collection for strengthening routine immunization with the Inter-American Development Bank, and a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Economic Development, in collaboration with the World Bank, to support retroactive payment for the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines through the UNICEF Supply Division.

Leveraging partnership with United Nations agencies as part of United Nations reform remained a priority. In collaboration with PAHO/WHO and UNFPA, UNICEF partnered in drafting a tripartite compact in support of health systems-strengthening with a focus on maternal, neonatal, child and adolescent health, sexual and reproductive health, and quality health service delivery. Also, in collaboration with IOM and UNHCR, UNICEF signed the second consecutive joint workplan in support of migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and host communities. The plan outlines priority actions to increase coordination among United Nations agencies and provide comprehensive support and services to migrant families and children.

Continued partnerships with United Nations agencies under Joint SDG Fund programmes ‘Building a resilient Belize through universal, adaptive and sustainable social protection’ (ILO and WFP), ‘Strengthening Belize’s Evidence Base and Systems for Crisis Response’ (WFP, FAO and UNESCO) and the Spotlight Initiative (UNDP and UNFPA) were advanced during the year. UNICEF also partnered with ILO on the development and launch of the 2022 Child Labour Policy and National Action Plan.

In terms of private sector partnerships, the CO also renewed its Memorandum of Understanding with BTL with a strategic shift from an annual agreement focusing on SMSs for U-Report to one of shared values and interest in advancing children’s rights over the duration of the five-year Country Programme. The CO signed a service contract with DigiWallet for humanitarian cash transfers – a partnership now being explored by the Ministry of Human Development, Families and Indigenous Peoples’ Affairs and WFP for cash-based support.

UNICEF established eight partnership agreements with CSOs in 2022. Engagement with CSOs in protection identified opportunities for ensuring accessible, available and affordable essential services, including protection, health and psychosocial support to the most vulnerable. The CO partnered with RESTORE Belize and the YWCA to promote gender transformation by breaking gender stereotyping and through empowerment, and in the scope of the Cash Plus pilot programme, established an agreement with the Belize Red Cross.

Partnerships with academia were enhanced through collaboration with the Stockholm International Water Institute to conduct a national WASH in Schools assessment, and with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Baylor University for a study on water analysis in schools.
As 2022 marked the first year of the Country Programme, the CO identified key lessons to inform programme implementation, enhance results for children, ensure continued efficiency in programme delivery and foster staff well-being.

Important investment in evidence generation in partnership with the government and CSOs has been invaluable in addressing assumptions and knowledge gaps, and refining programme strategies for the second year of the Country Programme. Key among these has been the need for strengthened integration of gender and disability considerations throughout the programme cycle, from initial assessments through programme implementation, monitoring and reporting.

Additionally, engagement with non-traditional partners, such as the Ministry of Finance, is critical to achieving the programme results aimed at increasing investment for children and improving the efficiency of public spending.

Of note was the added value of facilitating civic engagement between policymakers and key constituents, including women, adolescents and faith-based partners, as part of the development and peacebuilding continuum. Dialogue with faith leaders, the government, CSOs and United Nations agencies on the root causes of family violence, and consultations with the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus created opportunities for alliance-building and joint advocacy on violence against children and women, including reform of domestic violence legislation, ending corporal punishment in all its forms and increasing the age of criminal responsibility from 12 to 14 years.

Furthermore, in line with the principle of Accountability to Affected Populations of UNICEF’s Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, investment in engagement with communities from the design phase of interventions, with built-in feedback mechanisms to foster programme relevance and local ownership, was critical to ensure buy-in from and build trust with communities in the roll-out of the humanitarian cash transfer programme.

A key partnership is with the YWCA as a champion institution for gender-transformative education. For decades, the YWCA has been working to empower women, especially in the traditional roles of sewing, embroidery and cooking, among others. UNICEF supported the YWCA to organize non-traditional courses, such as public service driving and barbering for women, giving them an opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities to tackle gender stereotypes, raise awareness about women’s empowerment and encourage gender-transformative programmes. The first 16 women have graduated from the first level, with licences provided by the MYST. The programme will be expanded in 2023.

Innovation
In a COVID-19 recovery context, digitalization has become even more integral to UNICEF’s delivery of results for children, as the technology offers new, adaptable and agile ways of investing in human development and humanitarian actions. Hence, there have been considerable innovative approaches integrated into programme implementation in 2022. Highlights include innovative data collection for immunization through the mobile Commcare app, an open-source platform to build Android-based mobile applications for low-resource settings. The mobile application is expected to strengthen the MoHW’s case management system for tracking beneficiaries through the provision of services across the life cycle while simultaneously streamlining data collection and reporting. Institutionalizing CommCare increases front-line workers’ accuracy in reporting, tracking and supporting the registration, follow-up and delivery of services for clients in their communities. Although Commcare has already been deployed in a number of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Haiti, Peru, Colombia and Brazil), it was piloted in Belize in 2022 and will be rolled out through a phased approach.

Additionally, the CO worked with the Government of Belize to increase access to the internet and...
digital learning in schools. The preparatory work was time-consuming but impactful, resulting in complete buy-in from the government and collaboration, which are necessary for sustainability. The key steps for connecting all primary and secondary schools nationwide were agreed in collaboration with the MoECST and GIGA. This includes mapping the connectivity of schools in disadvantaged communities, with proposals for contributions of technological devices from the private sector; national curriculum reform, incorporating and developing digital skills; and identifying scalable digital learning solutions focused on enhanced teaching and learning for teachers, facilitators and learners themselves to effectively use the devices for learning.

As part of the cold chain systems-strengthening, UNICEF supported the MoHW in the training of quality improvement officers using innovative approaches to ensure sustainability. Instead of traditional classroom training, the CO carried out daily hands-on training to enable health-care workers to continue providing services to children and mothers as they improve their skills on-site. Quality improvement for maternal, neonatal and child health is new to primary health-care facilities and administration; therefore, this project required a lot of coordination between the clinical and administrative teams to understand the areas needing support for both in the short and long term and to ensure training modules are adapted to match each community.

The introduction of an innovative payment mechanism for cash-based support for children in Belize benefited from knowledge-sharing with other countries in the region and receiving extensive support from UNICEF headquarters and regional office colleagues. Engagement with a private sector company as a financial service provider requires solid due diligence processes and legal clearances, which presented an opportunity for a good learning experience for both the programme and operations teams.