

Comoros

Update on the context and situation of children

The small island nation of the Union of the Comoros is heavily dependent on food and fuel imports, mostly by sea, and thus has been **significantly impacted by the global disruption to shipping routes and commodity prices resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine**. The year 2022 was marked by **food shortages** affecting supplies of rice, a major staple in the country; flour; meat; and other foods. **Rising prices** brought the **average annual inflation rate to 10.4 per cent**, a 16.6 per cent variation compared to 2021. In addition, the country of approximately 820,000 people was still facing the global COVID-19 pandemic's multifaceted consequences. These factors impacted livelihoods, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable households in a country where approximately half of all children live in poverty, a third of whom live in extreme monetary poverty.

The impoverishment of the underprivileged, particularly children, remained a concern. Among the measures taken by Comorian authorities were **business subsidies** totalling US\$10.6 million **to ensure a sufficient supply of basic foodstuffs**. The effectiveness of such measures is difficult to ascertain, as prices continue to rise. Cost of living increases have a bearing on caregivers' choices and behaviours, with repercussions on household access to health, education, and child protection services.

With 49 per cent of the population vaccinated against COVID-19, Comoros is a leader among African countries. The new stage of the vaccination campaign, supported by UNICEF, was particularly effective among adolescents: 71 per cent of the country's 12–17-year-olds completed their full COVID-19 vaccination course.

The **COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the continuity of essential health service delivery, including vaccination**. Latest World Health Organization (WHO)/UNICEF estimates of national immunization coverage (WUENIC 2022) suggest that the percentage of children who received three doses of the vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus toxoid, and pertussis, while high, shows a declining trend – from 91 per cent in 2019 to 85 per cent in 2021. COVID-19 vaccine routinization may help boost child and adult vaccination rates and restore routine care service delivery continuity.

Regarding education, a diagnostic evaluation in the subjects of Mathematics, Early Learning, and French administered to 18,697 pupils attending 2nd, 3rd, and 6th grades of primary school revealed that more than half of the students lacked the required level of subject matter acquisition for their grade level. These results emphasized the need to promote foundational learning and translate the national Declaration on Transforming Education into a roadmap with specific milestones.

The commitment of the newly appointed Minister of **Education** to conduct **effective sector coordination dialogue through the Local Education Group (LEG)** – which brings together representatives of Government, financial and technical partners, civil society organizations, and private education providers – has reinvigorated the partnership framework and provided a platform for an effective and concerted dialogue on challenges, opportunities, policy, and strategy, hence improving the sector's governance capacity.

Comoros is also translating the political will to **make preschool education universal** into concrete action, in line with the provisions of the December 2020 orientation law, which mandates compulsory schooling from the age of three. At the start of the 2022/2023 school year, there were a total of 223 preschool classes in 154 of the country's 474 schools.

Integrated and holistic care for victims of violence continues to improve with the establishment of additional counselling and protection services that provide medical, psychosocial, and legal services in the form of a ‘one-stop shop’ for affected children and women. In 2022, 446 cases of violence were reported, of which 65 per cent related to children.

The Government has taken steps to **modernize the country’s civil registration and vital statistics system** with financial backing from the French Embassy and technical support from UNICEF. The President of Comoros officially launched the project in July 2022, emphasizing an efficient civil registration system as fundamental for the legal security of citizens, national development, and planning and public policy formulation. Modernization begun with a **standardized assessment of the existing civil registration system** to identify its strengths and weaknesses as well as the legislative, institutional, and organizational context in which it operates. This evaluation revealed **considerable achievements in birth registration, with 85 per cent of births being registered in the country**. By contrast, fewer than 10 per cent of marriages and deaths were being registered. Next steps include legislative reform and improving the interconnectivity of the civil registry with other public registries.

In 2022, Comoros held its first-ever **national summit on statistics** to review the current national statistics system and establish a more effective, inclusive, modern, and resilient system to monitor and implement the country's development aspirations, as outlined in the Emerging Comoros Plan 2030 (PCE), which maps the path to achieve the country’s contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union Agenda 2063.

The year 2022 marked the beginning of the programme cycle for two key 2022–2026 frameworks: the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) and the new UNICEF country programme, which was developed in alignment with the UNSDCF and national priorities.

A **decree creating governance structures to support the PCE** is expected to **improve joint coordination and monitoring between the Government and development partners**, including the United Nations. Following the 2019 Conference of Development Partners of the Comoros, a Government roundtable was held in December 2022 to conduct a joint assessment of the PCE implementation and renew and expand financial commitments and strategic partnerships in support of the post-COVID-19 recovery plan 2022–2026.

There is concern that **Comoros is increasingly seen as a transit route from the African mainland to the island of Mayotte** and onward to Europe. This route is becoming an increasingly popular alternative for African migrants, including very young children. This is a troubling development for Comoros, which does not have a national asylum system in place to determine who qualifies for international protection. The country is not party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, or the 1969 African Union Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Social policy

An **update of the situation of child poverty** was undertaken in collaboration with the National Institute of Statistics and Economic and Demographic Studies (INSEED); this was based on the harmonized survey on household living conditions carried out in 2020 with the support of the World Bank. The results will help strengthen advocacy to encourage national decision-makers to give due priority to the needs of children in the design and implementation of national and sectoral policies.

UNICEF has continued to support budget transparency, which is essential for child-friendly

public finance management. The Comoros Country Office supported the participation of Members of the Comorian Parliament in a regional Workshop on Integrated National Financing Frameworks & Open Budgets for Sustainable Development in Africa held in Abuja, Nigeria, in September 2022. As result, the Ministry of Finance, Budget and the Banking Sector, in collaboration with the Assembly of the Union of the Comoros, plans to improve its domestic financing and budget transparency by raising the Open Budget Index of the Comoros from 0 per cent in 2021 to 30 per cent in 2023.

In the area of social protection, UNICEF continued to strengthen the economic resilience of disadvantaged households in six rural localities by providing technical support to seven women's groups made up of 95 former beneficiaries of cash transfers as they implement income-generating activities using funds donated in 2019. Between 2021 and 2022, one of the groups generated approximately US\$3,400, a sum which was distributed among its 16 members to help address the needs of each family, with particular focus on children's education and health.

The **socioeconomic reintegration programme launched in 2021 reached 114 adolescent mothers** identified by the counselling and protection services for children and women who have experienced violence, in collaboration with the regional directorates of social protection on the islands. Approximately 62 of the single mothers decided to resume their education, with 4 obtaining the high school baccalaureate diploma in 2022, while 52 others chose to learn a trade, whether sewing traditional clothes, pastry-making, or catering. Four of the participants have set up a small business after taking a six-month sewing course in Mwali.

Basic education, including water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)

National consultations organized in the Comoros within the framework of the September 2022 **Transforming Education Summit** held in New York provided a springboard for discussion of the challenges facing the country's education system, including preschool education provision, in the context of a global paradigm shift as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The consultations also highlighted the need to develop a new long-term education sector plan to transform the country's education system.

As part of the regional initiative on inclusive education in Eastern and Southern Africa, UNICEF conducted an inventory of good practices in the Comoros. Thanks to the measures immediately adopted by the Ministry of National Education, Teaching and Research following the April 2022 national workshop, **12 children with disabilities from experimental schools in Ndzouwani were able to take part in and pass the college entrance exam**. The **adaptive measures** put in place consisted of installing curtains in order to dim the light from the windows to make reading easier for visually impaired children and requesting teachers to stand closer and face hearing-impaired children during dictation, so as to allow them to lip-read.

Hygiene, safety, and protection for children in schools has improved thanks to the **installation of water cisterns and rainwater collection systems in public primary schools**, benefitting nearly 7,850 pupils, or approximately 6.5 per cent of the school population. This is especially critical considering low rainfall levels observed in recent years, and the limited water supply available to households and businesses in the country. In many cases, rainwater collection is proving to be the only source of available water supply for schools.

Outdoor play areas in schools have had a positive impact on young child attendance. UNICEF supported the installation of playgrounds made of recycled objects in 30 primary schools, benefitting nearly 9,600 students, including 1,300 children of preschool age.

UNICEF also supported a 13-month **in-depth training on education sector policies and management for five Ministry of Education executives**. The aim was to strengthen technical

capacity and increase accountability of technical departments, with a view to providing substantial support to the islands, particularly in the area of planning. This capacity building effort is carried out at a critical moment in the political/sector dialogue, which lays the foundations for the Education Sector Development Plan backed by the Emerging Comoros Plan (PCE).

UNICEF is fully engaged and provides technical support to the LEG and to the coordinating agency by consolidating progress made, particularly in the area of preschool education, and by supporting innovative distance learning approaches.

UNICEF also supported the **training of 131 pedagogical supervisors and teachers**, strengthening their capacity in supportive pedagogical supervisions and teaching skills. As a result, 2,667 teachers at the primary and preschool level (including 1,013 women), representing 91 per cent of the total number of teachers in the Comoros, were trained and benefitted from close pedagogical coaching.

Child protection

UNICEF provided technical **support to the Government of the Union of the Comoros in its efforts to modernize the country's civil registration and vital statistics system.**

Three quarterly information bulletins relating to violence against children and women were published thanks to an **update of the database of counselling and protection services** for children and women who have experienced violence. Data for 2022 revealed more cases of violence against children and women, especially among children between 11 and 17 years of age.

Additional decentralized services are being set up so as to **improve population access to counselling and protection services for children and women victims of violence**, with a new centre established, e.g. in the Mitsamihouli Hub Hospital. At the same time, staff employed to provide such services will often lack the necessary social work skills. To help fill this gap, UNICEF partnered with the Higher Institute of Social Work of Madagascar to support 25 social workers from the three Comoros islands to undertake a month-long **training**. In addition, a situation analysis and a training needs assessment were conducted and child protection actors validated a vocational training strategy, a job description for social workers, and a draft statute for social workers in the Union of the Comoros.

The texts of legal frameworks on the protection of children and women were disseminated to communities nationwide in 2021 and 2022 as part of an initiative to prevent all forms of violence in the Comoros. In addition, nearly **ten intergenerational dialogues** bringing together traditional leaders, religious figures, adolescents, women, and other members of society from across all social strata of the population were organized in 2022 to help build trust within communities and facilitate open intergenerational conversations on the protection of children and women.

Regional directorates in charge of child protection have set up **clubs for adolescents around the country**. By the end of 2022, 60 such clubs attended by a total of nearly 1,200 adolescents were operational in schools and local sports teams. The purpose of teen clubs is to contribute to adolescents' resilience and their self-protection capacities and to create an enabling environment for desired population-level changes in attitudes, behaviours, norms, and practices.

UNICEF supported the Comorian Agency for International Cooperation (ACCI) to launch **Shwabaha, a free participatory online tool** for young Comorians. *Shwabaha*, which means opportunity in the Shikomori language, is a platform designed to help children and young people be better informed and express themselves on themes that matter to them, including violence against children and women. Nearly 300 young people on the three islands have been selected as champions to help promote use of the platform among peers in schools and communities.

Programme effectiveness

UNICEF is **supporting the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)** being undertaken in the Comoros to provide the country with evidence to inform decision-making and guide the development of public policies for children and women – the first survey initiative since the 2012 DHS. Data collected in 2022 will be published in the full report in mid-2023.

As part of an initiative to strengthen the country's evaluation capacity, the UNICEF Comoros Country Office worked with the Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa to support public policy evaluation training for 37 participants from a range of backgrounds, including the Presidency, Parliament, sectoral ministries, universities, civil society, and independent consultancies. The objective was to anchor evaluative culture in practice to improve governance and accountability in the Comoros. The initiative led to the establishment of a think tank on strengthening the promotion of evaluation in the country. In addition, plans to reactivate the dormant National Centre for Analysis and Research on Public Policies, a government structure responsible for evaluating public policies within the General Planning Commission, were announced.

Health and nutrition, including social and behaviour change (SBC)

UNICEF sustained its **high-level advocacy and technical support to the Government** of the Union of the Comoros to secure funding for both traditional and co-financed vaccines in 2022, despite the limited fiscal space for expanded social spending. UNICEF **supported the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI)**, particularly in the planning, monitoring and implementation of vaccination operations and operational components at both central and decentralized levels throughout the year. Nevertheless, the reach of **immunization services** in the Comoros has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Together with WHO, the World Bank, Gavi, Red Cross, and other partners, UNICEF supported the **development of the new National Immunization Strategy (NIS)** which has a strong focus on reducing inequity and reaching zero-dose communities.

To enable effective management of vaccination, UNICEF supported the installation of solar panels in some healthcare settings and the maintenance of all cold chain equipment, including the central depot. UNICEF also backed implementation of the new generation of the **vaccine Stock Management Tool (SMT)** as part of the digital Logistics Management Information System (e-LMIS) to **optimize the management of vaccines** so as to avoid losses and prevent stockouts.

An **Effective Vaccine Management (EVM)** assessment using the EVM 2.0 tool indicated average results from the logistics supply chain. The resulting overall score of 67 per cent at the national level is well below the 80 per cent threshold recommended by WHO. The rest of the results were as follows: 68 per cent for the central depot, 67 per cent for the regional level, 68 per cent for district depots, and 65 per cent for health centre depots. Following this exercise, UNICEF supported the development of an EVM gap improvement plan, with a detailed analysis of the points to address and relevant recommendations.

UNICEF also contributed to the **new stage of the vaccination campaign against COVID-19** that resulted in 71 per cent of adolescents aged 12–17 years completing the full course of COVID-19 vaccination **and supplied ultra-low-temperature freezers for each of** the three main islands of the Comoros: Ngazidja, Mwali, and Ndzuwani.

In order to achieve vaccination results in a context of rumours and disinformation, UNICEF worked with adolescents and young people as agents of change who can turn the tide and encourage people to get vaccinated against COVID-19. This included funding **behaviour change communication activities** targeting communities with the support of teen clubs and young reporters. While healthy behaviours and acceptance of immunization were the main goal, this was also an entry point for carrying out cross-sectoral activities related to other important areas for UNICEF. A total of 140

young reporters and 200 teen club members were trained on risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) related to vaccination against COVID-19; children's rights; and responsible use of the Internet and social media, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube.

In addition, UNICEF supported the **establishment of 332 village committees** in as many villages; such committees include youth representatives. In total, more than 90,000 people were directly reached through interpersonal communication; a figure that exceeded 400,000 when including those reached through radio, television, and social media channels.

The Union of the Comoros is also part of a representative, time-series **SBC Community Rapid Assessment (CRA) data collection exercise** covering COVID-19 vaccination, routine immunization, and maternal, neonatal and child health. This exercise started in November 2022 and will be rolled out throughout 2023; findings will inform health and immunization programme planning.

In the field of nutrition, UNICEF continued to support the scale-up of the **management of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) in all 17 district health centres for intensive care and 25 health posts for outpatient treatment**, and encouraged parents and caregivers to use mid-upper-arm circumference (MUAC) measurements to assess for malnutrition at home. A total of 64,225 children aged 6–59 months were screened for malnutrition on the three islands: of those, 2.9 per cent were found to have moderate acute malnutrition and 1.5 per cent were admitted for care. The cure rate for those who were admitted for treatment was 87 per cent; 12 per cent abandoned treatment. In addition, thanks to mass campaigns, 98 per cent of children aged 6–59 months old received vitamin A supplementation and 57 per cent of pregnant women received iron and folic acid supplementation as well as deworming treatment.

Together with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), WHO, and the World Bank, UNICEF worked with the Government on the **development of a maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health strategy for the Comoros**. UNICEF supported the training of 75 health professionals, including midwives and nurses working in the field of reproductive health, in the management of care for newborns with low birthweight and/or health complications and kangaroo care. UNICEF also sponsored relevant equipment, tools, job aids, and capacity building of healthcare staff in the **newborn care departments of the 3 centers of excellence** on the three islands.

In addition, UNICEF harnessed both traditional and social media to promote children's rights in 15 different **information campaigns** focusing on areas such as health, education, and violence prevention. This included 20 radio and television spots and 60 Facebook and Twitter posts, which attracted a total of 4,800 reactions.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF partnerships were essential in designing and implementing initiatives that benefitted children. UNICEF also contributed to United Nations-wide strategic planning, partnership building, and joint advocacy, chairing the Operations Management Team, the United Nations Communications Group, and the Planet Results Group.

UNICEF **collaborated with central- and island-level Government entities, including co-leading the PCE's People Pillar**. UNICEF worked closely with INSEED and the National Commission for Solidarity, Social Protection and Gender Promotion on updating child poverty information, and with the General Directorate of Budget on citizen budget production.

UNICEF collaborated with the **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Resident**

Coordinator's Office on public finance for children, with joint support provided to the Ministry of Finance and the Assembly on strengthening the Integrated National Financing Framework and budget transparency. Thanks to such efforts, civil society organization Citizen Initiative on Budget Transparency was involved in 2023 budget review conferences.

With the **Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, UNDP and UNFPA, UNICEF** jointly mobilized SDG emergency funds, leading to funding for the SAM treatment.

UNICEF and WHO supported the Department of Family Health in planning, implementing and monitoring the COVID-19 vaccination campaign while sustaining essential maternal and child health service provision. The campaign's success is the result of support from UNICEF and other partners – including the **Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, WHO, and the World Bank.**

With **Gavi and WHO**, UNICEF led the evaluation of effective vaccine management **and** national immunization supply chain performance, benchmarking it against best-practice standards.

UNFPA and UNICEF supported the production of quarterly General Delegation for Human Rights bulletins on violence against children and women; mobilization of additional resources from the **British Embassy** for the fight against gender-based violence; and the *Shwabaha* platform launch with the **Comorian Agency for International Cooperation.**

UNICEF remained a **leading LEG actor** and extended collaboration with long-standing partners, including the **Global Partnership for Education** and **Dubai Cares**, as well as establishing new partnerships: with **USAID** on foundational learning and numeracy, and with the Education Above All Foundation's **Educate a Child** programme on climate change.

Financial assistance from the **Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA)** enabled UNICEF to support prevention of and response to violence against children and women. UNICEF collaborated with the **Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)** to support the Government in improving nutrition. The French Embassy provided financial support and UNICEF provided technical support for the modernization of the civil registration and vital statistics system project. **In addition, UNICEF mobilized and leveraged funding for the MICS 6 survey, with JICA, KOICA, UNFPA, and the World Bank** contributions.

With UNICEF Regional Office support, the Country Office mobilized **Global Evaluation Fund resources**, which helped establish a partnership with the **Center for Learning on Evaluation and Results Francophone Africa Branch** to conduct training on evaluating public policies.

With **WHO and the World Bank**, UNICEF supported the **creation of community platforms.**

The UNICEF-facilitated partnership between the University of Comoros and Higher Institute of Social Work of Madagascar provided a good illustration of **South–South cooperation.**

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Multisectoral collaboration – specifically the involvement of education actors to support youth vaccination – is recognized as an important success factor in the context of vaccination campaigns against COVID-19. The routinization of the COVID-19 vaccination has enabled the pooling of resources dedicated to COVID-19 in support of other routine activities. It will therefore be essential to **continue promoting multisectoral and integrated approaches** to WASH, protection, nutrition, and birth registration.

The **peer outreach approach**, which harnessed the peer power of young reporters and members of teen clubs, yielded excellent results in 2022. In 2023, greater engagement will take place to empower young people to be champions for the environment.

Learning losses caused by school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic led the Ministry of Education and UNICEF to **revise the in-service teacher training strategy**.

UNICEF support for the participation of Comoros in the regional workshop on Integrated National Financing Frameworks & Open Budgets has opened **stronger collaboration with the Assembly of the Union of the Comoros**. This collaboration can further strengthen advocacy for greater mobilization of domestic and more sustainable resources.

The creation and strengthening of existing community and digital platforms, such as village health committees, young reporters, or networks of mother leaders, made it possible to **strengthen community engagement for children's rights**.