

Oman

Update on the context and situation of children

In 2021, Oman's GDP per capita stood at \$19,479[1] while its rank of 54 on the Human Development Index indicates very high human development, putting it also among the top six Arab countries.[2] "Oman Vision 2040" provides an ambitious framework for growth, spelling out goals related to human capital and well-being for all as the basis for future socio-economic growth and development. Yet continued economic uncertainty related to the price of oil, as well as a predicted demographic boom combined with some slippages in social indicators related to the impact of COVID-19, mean that close attention to and continued – if not enhanced – investment in children's issues is required to maintain and indeed improve children's well-being in Oman.

Oman's economy continued to recover and expand in 2022 boosted by increased activity in the oil and non-oil sectors. Gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to grow at rate of 4.3[3] per cent in 2022 up from growth of 3.1 per cent in 2021 and a contraction of 3.4[4] per cent in 2020. The impact of the war in Ukraine on Oman's economy has so far been limited. While global inflationary pressures combined with rebounding economic activity is expected to nudge average inflation to 3.1[5] per cent in 2022, the Omani rial-US dollar peg has helped keep inflationary pressure in check and relatively low.

If anything, the windfall from the increase in oil prices has allowed the government to increase social spending while still maintaining fiscal discipline. Increased revenues from higher oil prices and government measures to reduce debt are expected to result in budget and balance of payment surpluses in 2022 and in the medium term. Central government debt declined to 62.9 per cent of GDP in 2021 and it is expected to decline to about 44 percent of GDP in 2022.[6]

A key milestone this year is the emergence of a new social protection system that proposes universal child benefits, disability benefits and universal old age benefits amongst other measures. The government confirmed the availability of the fiscal space for the proposed social safety net schemes pending the approval of the proposed package.

Another milestone in 2022 was the joint certification by UNICEF, WHO and UNAIDS of Oman as the first country in the Middle East region as having eliminated mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis.[7]

Overall, the infant mortality rate (IMR) was 8.1 per 1,000 live births in 2021 compared to 7.6 in 2020; the under-five mortality rate (U5MR) increased to 10.2 from 9.3[8] in the same period. Oman provides free universal health coverage (UHC) to citizens and affordable essential medicines are available in 100 per cent of health facilities.[9] While Oman has attained the maternal, new-born and child health indicators under SDG3, some "significant challenges" remain; specifically, lower life expectancy at birth compared with other high-income countries, and noncommunicable diseases.

The maternal mortality rate (MMR) was increased from 29.4 in 2020 to 45.7 in 2021.[10] While analysis is on-going, one factor driving Oman's maternal mortality ratio is poor maternal nutrition. This is also reflected in the rate of new-borns with low birthweight (11.7 per cent) and the anaemia rate amongst pregnant women (29.3 per cent).[11]

The child stunting rate is 11.4 per cent, the child wasting rate is 9.3 per cent and 4.2 per cent of children are overweight or obese[12]. Sub-optimal feeding practices are contributing to this with the exclusive breastfeeding rate standing at 23.2 per cent. These indicators are reflected in Oman's progress towards SDG2 where "major challenges" remain.

The enrolment rate in early childhood education was 51.8 per cent for the year 2018. At the end of 2019, 51.5 per cent of children were enrolled before the official primary school entry age, reduced to 24.5 per cent in 2020. The rate was slightly lower for boys (24.3 per cent) than girls (24.8 per cent). [13]

More positively, Oman has achieved universal primary education and continues to improve in secondary education enrolment (99.6 per cent in 2020). Gender parity increases in favour of girls as children progress from grades 1 to 12.

However, there are issues related to education quality and its alignment with labour market requirements.[14] Overall, however, Oman is on track or maintaining its achievements towards SDG4. The legal framework for child protection is relatively robust. Child Protection Committees (CPCs) have been set up to prevent and address child abuse. Oman expressed its commitment to prohibiting all corporal punishment of children, which is illegal at school. Reporting of child rights violations is mandatory. In 2021, the most recent year for which data is available, 1,507 cases of abuse were reported to the CPCs. Overall, Oman needs more data to fully report on SDG 16. The population increased to 4.92 million in December 2022. Of the total population, 58.2 per cent are Omanis and 41.8 per cent are expatriates. Young people under the age of 19 make up about 30 per cent of the population.[15] Oman's E-Census 2020 indicated that around just 1 per cent of Omani children between 0-17 years old, or 10,880 children, have a disability.

[1] National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), Data Portal, 2021

[2] *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Development Report 2021-2022*

[3] IMF, IMF Country Report No. 22/343, November 2022

[4] Statistical Year Book 2022, NCSI, p268

[5] IMF, IMF Country Report No. 22/343, November 2022

[6] IMF, IMF Country Report No. 22/343, November 2022

[7] World Health Organization

[8]. NCSI (2022), Statistical Year Book, 2021 data

[9] Oman Supreme Council for Planning, (draft) Moving Forward with Confidence; United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development July 2019, First Voluntary National Review (English), 2019.

[10] NCSI (2022), Statistical Year Book, 2021 data

[11] Ministry of Health of the Sultanate of Oman, UNICEF. (2017). Oman National Nutrition Survey.

[12] ONNS 2017 (P.IV)

[13] NCSI data on pre-school enrolment rate. accessible at: <https://data.gov.om/wmvjdr/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%8A?lang=ar>

[14] PIRLS 2016, Exhibit 5.1: School Composition by Socioeconomic Background of Student Body (students categorized by principals' reports). <<http://pirls2016.org/pirls/school-composition-and-resources/socioeconomic-composition-of-schools>>.

[15] NCSI

Major contributions and drivers of results

The Oman Country Office (OCO) started a new country programme (CP) cycle spanning 2022 to 2025. As Oman is a high-income and stable country, UNICEF's role in the Sultanate is very different from many other country offices in that rather than programme implementation, the focus is to advocate for, and support the government to develop, child-related policies and frameworks. Results seek to contribute to UNICEF's Global Strategic Plan Areas 1, 2, 3 and 5, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the 2030 Agenda.

Goal Area 1: Every child, including adolescents, survives and thrives, with access to nutritious diets, quality primary health care, nurturing practices and essential supplies

Integrated early childhood development (IECD) is a key programme area that aligns with Oman's commitment to SDGs 2, 3, 4 and 5, as well as national development plans.

Improving health and nutrition, especially for mothers and children, is a priority for Oman. To this end, the government is seeking improve monitoring of nutrition indicators to better understand where failures in nutrition programming lie and to develop better programmes. During the year, the Ministry

of Health (MoH), supported by UNICEF, made progress towards bolstering nutrition monitoring and reporting, including Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG2) indicators, using routine data generated by its health information management system (HIMS). Key steps have been taken to improve data supply, demand and use for monitoring purposes and programme design, including aligning the country's nutrition indicators with international standards, enhancing the quality of data, strengthening the function of the HMIS, and coordination across multiple sectors. The next stage of the work in 2023 will focus on building a nutrition dashboard.

Thirty years ago, Oman was an early adopter of the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) and, after the programme launched in the Sultanate in 1992, all government hospitals were quickly rated as baby friendly. The Ministry of Health this year decided to relaunch the initiative and asked UNICEF, in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), for support in this endeavour. UNICEF trained 17 baby-friendly hospital assessors who will ensure that critical management procedures and key clinical practices are in place in hospitals across Oman allowing them to be accredited as baby-friendly facilities and ensuring a more supportive environment in hospitals for mothers. It is anticipated that World Health Organization (WHO) will now take this activity forward, preparing hospitals for the accreditation process. In 2023, UNICEF will support the government to develop a parenting programme.

Over the past two years, UNICEF Oman has worked with UNICEF's Office for Innovation and government partners on an initiative to establish Oman as a primary health care (PHC) centre of excellence to drive the development of cutting-edge technologies, goods and services that will address PHC challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and improve health outcomes. The initial area of focus is to be immunization. The initiative underscores a government priority to promote Oman as a regional logistics hub. During the year, UNICEF finalized a comprehensive, costed business plan to guide the establishment of the hub. This is currently being reviewed by the hub's Advisory Group comprised of officials from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and the Ministry of Health as well as UNICEF colleagues from the MENA regional office and headquarters. UNICEF is poised to work with the Government of Oman in 2023 to make the hub operational.

Goal Area 2: Every child, including adolescents, learns and acquires skills for the future

In the second half of the year UNICEF started participating in a cross-sectoral steering committee established by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and comprised of representatives from the ministries of social development and health, and SQU to oversee the development of a national action plan for the roll-out of inclusive education services to children with disabilities. This work also builds on previous support extended to the education ministry to develop an inclusive school policy (endorsed in 2019), an Inclusive Teacher Training Guide and the establishment of a core group of trainers at the MoE Teacher Training Institute.

UNICEF this year concluded the work on a landscape analysis identifying key challenges and opportunities for adolescents across the four Generation Unlimited dimensions: education and training; employment; entrepreneurship; and engagement and equity. UNICEF also drafted a roadmap and an implementation plan that will guide the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MCSY) in putting in place and scaling up the recommendations from the landscape analysis and, more generally, to inform MCSY's ongoing youth programming.

UNICEF, in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), continued to work on developing a Situation Analysis of Adolescents and Youth (SitAn) in the Sultanate of Oman. The study covers five themes: education and skills, school-to-work transition, employment, and entrepreneurship.

Goal Area 3: Every child, including adolescents, is protected from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and harmful practices

UNICEF continued to support the ministries of health, education, and social development to roll out a nationwide programme to train mental health practitioners, social workers, and other service providers in the provision of mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS) to children, adolescents, and parents. UNICEF supported the training of core trainers this year as well as in 2021, and a national team of 28 core trainers is now ready to deliver the programme countrywide. Catalysed by the COVID-19 outbreak and its harmful impact on mental health, this activity will ultimately contribute to

a stronger overall care environment in schools.

Since the conclusion of the Case Management System pilot project in December 2020, UNICEF has been poised to support its roll-out nationwide. However, this activity remained on hold throughout 2022 due to capacity constraints within the MoSD which is tasked with taking this forward.

Goal Area 5: Every child has an equitable chance in life

Throughout the year, UNICEF continued to work with the government and the International Labour Organization (ILO) to design a new comprehensive, integrated, shock-responsive and sustainable social protection system that aims to shield the population from financial hardship throughout their lives. The new proposed system includes a number of benefit schemes that contribute to well-being of children and vulnerable members of the population. These are:

- 1) A universal child benefits scheme that will cover all children in Oman aged 0-17 years, regardless of their parents' employment status or income level;
- 2) A benefits scheme for orphans that will be provided to all orphaned children (0-17);
- 3) A benefits scheme for widows and widowers; and
- 4) Family income support for divorced parents and unmarried women above specified age thresholds.

UNICEF concluded the work in conjunction with ILO supporting the government to design a new social protection system. The proposal for the new social protection system has been approved by the cabinet and will go to the State Council for approval in January 2023. UNICEF also worked with ILO to provide technical support for the development of a social protection policy framework, which underpins the proposed new benefits schemes. The framework aims to align the vision for social protection across all relevant sectors, reduce fragmentation and improve coverage, and ensure the system is sustainable. The policy clusters the new social protection system around three pillars: dignity and well-being; opportunities; and efficiency and sustainability. This work is ongoing.

To improve the integration of the contributory and non-contributory components of the system, UNICEF supported the government to develop a high-level design for an integrated management information system (a single registry) and request for proposals (RFP) to guide the selection of a service provider to develop the MIS. Ultimately however, the government decided to develop the single registry internally though still using the RFP as a guide.

A key proposed design element is that the case management system would be incorporated within the single registry, with the vision of reinforcing the child protection system through universal child benefits as well as benefits for orphans and children with disabilities.

Building on the fiscal space analysis concluded in 2021, UNICEF worked with Tawazun and the ministries of finance, education, and health to develop a fiscal model that will allow for sufficient and efficient spending on health and education services that will deliver health and education outcomes in line with Vision 2040 objectives. The project was divided into three phases.

During the first phase, analysis was undertaken based on two principles: "spending enough" and "spending well." This phase included a high-level mapping of public finance management (PFM) processes, predictability and adequacy of financing, allocative efficiencies, and efficient use of the allocated funds for the two ministries. The second phase focused on identifying sustainable solutions to address the funding gaps within the two-line ministries. UNICEF supported the government to develop an updated fiscal space analysis, budget briefs, and optimization/efficiency reports to build a suitable fiscal model and ensure informed decision-making between the three ministries. The optimization initiatives were based on four criteria included they deliver maximum savings; they are technically and politically feasible; they can be implemented within a specific timeline; and they are measurable. The findings of this phase are being consolidated into a medium-term budget framework, a binding document that brings together the ministries of finance, health and education around clear commitments based on the three principles of the fiscal model.

During phase three, UNICEF worked on fleshing out the details of the optimization initiatives in close collaboration with health and education ministries to ensure ease of implementation. In addition, a high-level costing analysis to estimate the adequacy of financing for the health and education sectors

was conducted. For health, the work concluded that an increase in spending, including investment, and sustained efficiency improvements are required.

Advocacy and communications

UNICEF seized a number of opportunities to advocate for children in Oman this year. The country office used the preparatory meetings for Oman's participation in the Transforming Education Symposium (TES) to advocate for the introduction of early child education services throughout Oman and the development of a financing strategy to ensure sustainable and predictable education financing. At the same time, UNICEF also advocated for the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education based on international best practice and reflecting the local context.

2022 also saw a number of new and bigger communications initiatives and results. An important milestone this year was the appointment of radio host and influencer Qusai Mansoor as UNICEF Oman's first Child Rights Advocate. His appointment was announced on World Children's Day (WCD) and his first engagement was a social media appearance with the representative urging UNICEF supporters and followers to "go blue" to mark the occasion. The appointment of Mansoor is already delivering results reflected in increased social media reach and engagement, and brand awareness. Mansoor's appointment resulted in an immediate jump in social media account followers, and the post announcing his appointment was one of the top three posts of the year.

UNICEF ran a successful WCD social media campaign with influential child rights' supporters in government, embassies (including seven ambassadors), business, civil society and other UN agencies wearing blue and posting a picture of themselves with a message about diversity and inclusion – this year's WCD theme – on social media channels. Participation was enthusiastic and widespread. The "Go Blue" activation post was in the top 10 posts of the year. The video had a reach of 3,255 accounts with 150 engagements (this compares with an average reach of 500 to 1,000 accounts and roughly 40 engagements for a typical post in 2022).

Following the success of ministerial roundtable discussions to mark WCD in 2021 even more ministers were eager to participate this year. UNICEF organized six discussions involving 50 children (up from four events and 32 children in 2021) with the new Minister of Health as well as the ministers of information, social development, and education. Events were also held with Be'ah, a government-run environmental waste services company, to discuss climate change and sustainability, and Children First Association, a civil society organization, to discuss topics including volunteering and programmes for children with disabilities. UNICEF disseminated school takeover packs for WCD and at least 20 schools, nurseries and disability centres across the country held events and posted on social media tagging UNICEF. Out with WCD, a separate roundtable was held with the Undersecretary for Sports and Youth with 10 children in July.

UNICEF continued to develop its social media presence throughout 2022. By the end of year, UNICEF Oman's social media platforms saw a combined annual reach of roughly 733 thousand (733,000) accounts (a 15 per cent increase from 2021) with a total engagement of approximately 45,151 likes, reactions, comments, shares/retweets and saves (a 91.3 per cent increase from 2021). On an average month, the platforms saw a combined reach of roughly 45,000 accounts and an average of 3,763 engagements.

Community engagement, social and behaviour change

As was reported last year, a national Social and Behaviour Change (SBC) strategy was approved in early 2021. The first SBC campaign, focusing on violence against children and early childhood education, had been due to launch in February 2022 and UNICEF supported the development of materials, including a series of educational videos to address corporal punishment, neglect, and online bullying, and to promote the availability and benefits of ECE services. Several local influencers were recruited to participate in the campaign and their amplification of messages was expected to result in wide national reach. However, the campaign was delayed until the first quarter of 2023.

Risk communication and community engagement work relating to the COVID-19 outbreak was concentrated mainly in the first quarter of 2022. Thanks to the successful rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign case numbers started to fall in early 2022. UNICEF continued to work with the MoH to promote good hygiene and other preventive measures via social media messaging. UNICEF Oman continued social media listening to monitor attitudes to the COVID-19 situation until the end of

Q1 2022.

Data, research, evaluation and knowledge management

Throughout the year, UNICEF advocated for the implementation of a multiple indicator cluster survey (MICS7) which help fill important existing data gaps on child-related indicators, including the SDGs. The arrival of the new representative and her subsequent one-on-one introductory meetings with ministers, undersecretaries and other high-ranking officials provided numerous opportunities to reiterate the point. UNICEF is in ongoing negotiation with the Omani government aiming to start the implementation in 2023/ 2024.

As part of UNICEF's knowledge transfer agenda and commitment to introducing best practices in programming in Oman, UNICEF delivered two capacity building events to members of the Programme Management Group (PMG)[1]. The first was on the linkages between child protection and social protection and the associated tools. The second was on family-friendly policies and their impact on family welfare and human capital development.

[1] Established by ministerial decree, the PMG is the government's multi-sectoral steering committee that guides the implementation of UNICEF's programme. It is chaired by MoSD and also comprises officials from the ministries of education and health and the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

In principle, the implementation of UNICEF's country programme is supposed to be steered by the multi-sectoral Programme Management Group (PMG), chaired by MoSD. As well as ensuring coordinated programme implementation, the vision for the PMG is that it would also ensure linkages with Vision 2040 objectives. However, this has proved to be a challenge in practice; for example, whereas UNICEF prefers to meet the PMG quarterly, only one meeting was convened during the year. The PMG's approval of the rolling work plan (RWP) 2022-2023 was delayed until January 2023. Nevertheless, UNICEF was able to obtain the bilateral approval of each line ministry of the contents of the RWP.

In addition, UNICEF was able to leverage its long-established and strong bilateral relations with individual ministries and Tawazun to deliver on-target results for children. Members of the PMG worked bilaterally with the UNICEF team – and, with thanks to UNICEF's convening power, together – to review and prioritise activities for 2022 and 2023.

The Business Leadership Circle (BLC) remains the main forum for UNICEF to coordinate private sector support for children. BLC activity also slowed this year, mainly as a result of the changeover in representative. In the last quarter of 2022, the new representative and the external relations team developed a reinvigorated BLC strategy and reviewed membership. A BLC meeting has been organized for early January, and a more productive and focused BLC is expected in 2023. Outside the BLC, two telecoms firms, Omantel and Ooredoo, organized free text blasts on behalf of UNICEF to encourage young people to participate in the youth e-discussion.

Not surprisingly given its status as a high-income country, Oman has limited presence of UN agencies: only FAO, UNFPA and WHO are resident, and there is no Resident Co-ordinator. During the year, UNICEF collaborated with UNFPA on the Situation Analysis of Adolescents and Youth; with ILO on the social protection policy with UNESCO on education; and with WHO on the BFHI. The country office is also exploring a partnership with WHO to support Tawazun's health financing work.

UNICEF organized a gathering of the UN agencies resident in Oman (FAO, UNFPA and WHO) to exchange ideas and information about their respective operations in Oman. The agencies also explored potential areas of cooperation to advance the child right's agenda in Oman. This initiative was well received by the agencies involved and should serve as a basis for closer collaboration in 2023.

Co-ordination of activities

The PMG met once mid-year to discuss activities planned under the RWP, which was ultimately signed in early January 2023. Continuing strong partnerships with line ministries and Tawazun complemented PMG engagement and offered a way to coordinate the programme across ministries.

A separate lesson to have emerged this year is the importance of UNICEF “speaking the same language” as government counterparts. For example, Oman’s Ministry of Finance prefers certain words and phrases – for example the use of the term “public finance management” (PFM) as opposed to “public finance for children” (PF4C), which is more commonly used by UNICEF. Ministry officials favour “PFM” because they believe it to be a less narrow term and not specific to one age demographic. UNICEF sensitivity to this was important for retaining the ministry’s cooperation – keeping in mind that, ultimately, a strong and trusted partnership with the Ministry of Finance facilitated timely access to required data.

E-discussion

A major challenge was securing the participation of young people in the online discussion to inform the Situation Analysis on Adolescents and Youth. The target of 1,000 participants was widely missed with only 153 young people signing up to comment – this is despite 19,000 visitors to the site. Key takeaways were that the discussion format was overly complex and there were concerns about anonymity. Feedback suggested that young people would be more likely to participate if the survey was multiple choice, rather than open-ended questions. For any future survey, UNICEF must also consider how to better reassure participants of confidentiality.

Capacity Building

Deploying an embedded economist to work with the ministries of finance, health and education in the PFM work proved useful in that it allowed the consultant to provide on-the-job knowledge transfer, training, and capacity building. The economist’s presence was also instrumental in improving dialogue and understanding between the three entities.

Embarking on the nutrition monitoring work this year, one lesson to quickly emerge is that improving the administrative data system requires not only looking at the quality and availability of data, but also improving the capacity of the people and teams who generate and use the data.

The incorporation of the case management system within the social protection system also requires capacity building of the social workforce. UNICEF has initiated discussions with technical teams from the ministries of education, health, and social development to enhance the quality of the social workforce. A few separate initiatives, such as mental health and case management training, have taken place. However, high-level advocacy is required to introduce an accreditation programme for social workers and a comprehensive review of their mandate across the three ministries.