

Panama

Update on the context and situation of children

After the economic crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy in Panama rebounded in 2022, bringing the country back to high-income status. At the end of 2022, Panama registered a GDP growth of 9%, among the highest in Latin America [1]. The country also remains one of the countries with the highest levels of inequality in the region [2] and its GINI coefficient is projected to increase over the coming years. Although poverty is expected to decrease in 2023 due to the mitigating effects of the new social protection programme *Panama Solidario* and the recovery of the labour market [3], informality and self-employment are high (48%) [4]. Low social spending and centralized public investment underlie high and persistent inequalities in social investments, especially among Indigenous and rural communities.

The situation of children in Panama

Children make up 32% of the population in Panama. Three out of 10 children live in multidimensional poverty [5]. In 2022, the Government took decisive steps towards improving conditions for children and adolescents – a new law creating a comprehensive child protection system was approved; there was a significant investment for transitioning children in residential care to family-based modalities in cases of special protection; a new policy document for early childhood services was released, establishing comprehensive and interdisciplinary services for every boy and girl aged 0-8 years; and there was a national commitment to increase GDP to education from 5.4% to 6% by 2024.

However, many children continue to lack access to quality services, especially those experiencing multiple and intersectional forms of exclusion, such as children living in poverty, Indigenous children, Afro descendant children, those living in rural areas, migrant children, children with disabilities and those without parental care.

- **Health:** Although the infant mortality rate (IMR) has shown a slight decrease in the past five years (at 11 per 1,000 births), the maternal mortality rate has almost doubled from 40 per 100,000 births in 2019 to 81 in 2020 [6]. The IMR in Indigenous regions is significantly above national average due to limited access to specialized prenatal and postnatal health services. Some 16% of children under 5 years are affected by stunting, while 22% of adolescents aged 10-14 are overweight and 14% are obese [7]. Although there is no official data on infant routine immunization coverage since 2019, local media outlets suggest a significant decrease after the pandemic.

- **Early childhood development (ECD):** The pre-pandemic data show that less than 3% of children below the age of 3 benefit from public ECD services. The efforts of the Government to expand the quality and coverage of these services should be highlighted, but investments focus on urban areas and remain too low to allow significant and rapid progress. While education is compulsory from the age of 4, only 77% of children attend preschool. The main bottleneck is the limited amount of pre-school classrooms, especially in indigenous and hard-to-reach areas.

- **Education:** Before the pandemic, over 127,000 children and adolescents aged 4-20 were out of school and 192,000 were at risk of dropping out [8]. According to the ERCE 2019 test, the quality of education in Panama is among the worst in Latin America and the Caribbean, with groups suffering from exclusion (such as Indigenous children) showing significantly lower achievement rates in literacy and numeracy. Schools were closed nationwide for over 21 months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Panama could face a 20% or higher dropout rate, and up to 88% of students could fail to achieve the minimum level of performance [9].

- Violence against children: The latest data estimated that 40% of children were victims of violent discipline [10]. The number of reported cases of child victims of violence increased from 3,033 in 2020 to 3,832 in 2022 [11]. It is also estimated that 64% of all cases of sexual violence are against children and adolescents [11]. There are over 1,000 children separated from their families and in residential care [12]. In most cases, the causes of separation - such as poverty, malnourishment or lack of access to schools near their communities - could be addressed through cash transfer programmes and social services. However, following concerted efforts in 2022, the Government ensured that some 10% of institutionalized children were returned to a family environment [12].
- Children on the move: In 2022, a total of 248,284 people crossed the dangerous Darien jungle by foot, including 40,438 children (16%), before continuing towards Costa Rica and ultimately the United States [13]. Most children in transit were from Venezuela, Ecuador, Brazil and Chile (in the last two cases, most children have Haitian parents). The number of unaccompanied and separated children reached a historic high at over 1,000 [14]. Six cases of stateless children and 28 cases of sexual violence against girls and women were identified [14].

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Major contributions and drivers of results

The UNICEF–Government of Panama Cooperation Programme focuses on three outcomes: (1) early childhood development, (2) education and adolescent participation, and (3) child protection, including emergency response to the migration crisis.

In 2022, UNICEF combined development work and emergency assistance, prioritizing life-saving interventions for children on the move, influencing legislation and budgets, providing high-level technical assistance for the development of public norms and standards, and modelling interventions for results at scale. The country office focused on working in a more integrated manner, with the launch of two new intersectoral initiatives.

UNICEF worked closely with the national and subnational authorities on the development of a **new model of basic, integrated social services at the local level**. The objective is to produce evidence to improve public policies, influence budgets, and ensure better coverage and quality of basic social services in health, ECD, education and child protection for all children, especially the most vulnerable.

As a result of UNICEF advocacy and strategic technical support, the Ministry of Social Development has now taken the lead and is bringing together the Ministries of Education and Health, as well as the National Secretariat of Children, Adolescents and Family (SENNIAF) and provincial, Indigenous and local authorities, for the implementation of this model. Authorities have committed human resources to support its roll-out in a province and a comarca (an Indigenous region). The model will have an M&E system (including a baseline, control group and formative/final evaluations). The implementation is expected to start in March 2023.

UNICEF also launched its first ever **integrated campaign**, bringing together social and behaviour change, advocacy, communication and fundraising, with a focus **on ECD**. This campaign includes four phases of nine months each, with specific themes for each phase (such as violence prevention stimulation, nutrition) over a period of four years. The campaign has an M&E system (including a baseline and final evaluation). The integration of all forms of communication is expected to bring efficiency and effectiveness gains through the repetition of messages through all our communication media.

1. Early childhood development (ECD)

In 2022, UNICEF continued to support national authorities in improving the coverage and quality of ECD services in Panama, across the health, education and social sectors. **Over 16,000 children aged 0-8 benefited from UNICEF engagement in ECD in Panama.**

The country office provided technical expertise to the Government, resulting in the release of a **new policy document for early childhood, establishing comprehensive and interdisciplinary services for every child of this age group**. The policy *With you in Early Childhood* (Contigo en la Primera Infancia) organizes ECD services and provides tools to ensure quality, relevance, coverage and cultural fit. Results were achieved with the support of the Kimberly Clark Foundation.

UNICEF leveraged resources from the Development Bank of Latin America (known as CAF, its Spanish acronym) to provide expertise to the Ministry of Social Development to **increase access to early education services, with a focus on children 0–4 years old in hard-to-reach areas and peri-urban communities**. Standards of care were developed and over 100 practitioners were trained to implement early education services.

At the request of the Ministry of Social Development, UNICEF **led the independent evaluation of a modality of early education for community settings**, Mochila Cuidarte. This formative evaluation confirmed that it was a relevant, efficient and effective intervention, and it provided recommendations for improving protocols/quality standards, and for sustainability and scale-up. These recommendations are being implemented with UNICEF support.

UNICEF also provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Health to strengthen primary health care. As a result, Panama now has an **updated standard of primary health care for children 0–9 years old** and there are 48 practitioners qualified to train others nationwide in these standards. These practitioners are trained for measuring and monitoring child development with a standardized assessment to identify disabilities and development delays.

In collaboration with the Colombian NGO Canguro, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health in the **implementation of the Kangaroo Mother Care programme in five hospitals**, to reduce the risk of neonatal morbidity and mortality associated with low birth weight and premature births. In 2022, over **1,000 newborns benefited** from this programme.

UNICEF also worked with the Ministry of Health on the **development of standards of nutrition for children aged 0 to 9 years in the context of emergencies** and on the implementation of the mid-upper-arm circumference tape to identify and refer cases of acute malnutrition. In collaboration with

PAHO/WHO, UNICEF continued to **advocate for front-of-pack nutrition labelling**.

UNICEF continued to support the Ministry of Education on the **training of preschool teachers nationwide**. As a result, **over 300 teachers were trained** in 2022 to use and promote play in classrooms. The Ministry and UNICEF also identified gaps that will be addressed in coming years such as: greater and better involvement of preschool supervisors and directors of educational centres in the training processes; strengthening work with families in the learning process; providing tools to teachers; emphasizing inclusion, diversity and disability.

2. Education and adolescent participation

At the beginning of 2022, an alliance was formed between civil society organizations, health associations, the private sector, parents' groups and UN agencies to promote quality and universal education. UNICEF played an active role in this partnership to advocate for the face-to-face return of students to schools. UNICEF technical support to the Ministry of Education contributed to the **reopening of 3,106 public schools, benefiting more than 840,497 students throughout the country**.

Building on the evidence from the 2021 Out-of-School Children Initiative Study, supported by UNICEF, in 2022 the Ministry of Education developed a **national recovery plan and a guide for school learning recovery** with technical assistance from UNICEF. The study from 2021 estimated that 127,000 children and adolescents aged 4-20 in Panama were out of school and 192,000 were at risk of dropping out. It prompted a **study of flexible education modalities and experiences** for developing capacity in the country, and this knowledge was key in advising the Government on a **draft law for preventing school dropout**, which will be presented at the National Assembly in 2023.

UNICEF also contributed to strengthening the quality of education by providing expertise to the Ministry of Education to **improve the system of continuing professional teacher development**. Following the development of a diagnostic for on-the-job training for teachers, UNICEF supported the preparation of a workplan and will continue working with the Ministry of Education to implement the plan.

UNICEF released the first ever **Situation Analysis of Adolescents in Panama** on World Children's Day, together with a group of adolescents. The study is being used to inform the UNICEF Programme of Cooperation with the Government of Panama and advocate for normative and social norms changes for the most vulnerable adolescents.

In 2022, UNICEF supported the **participation of 227 adolescents in intergenerational and institutional dialogues about issues such as climate change, human rights, gender and education**. Their engagement was key to influence the intervention by Panama at the UN Transforming Education Summit. Consultations with adolescents took place nationwide to gather their views and recommendations for implementing a new law on Digital Transformation in Education, approved in April 2022. Their participation also supported the development of an action plan to implement the Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action, making Panama the first country in the world to do so.

UNICEF continued to support **U-Report**. Five polls were released over the year with the participation of **over 3,900 U-Reporters**. U-Report social media reached 500,000 people.

3. Child protection

After decades of relentless advocacy and technical support by UNICEF and partners, **the parliament approved a ground-breaking law that creates a comprehensive child protection system in Panama**, thus responding to the several recommendations by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. This law requires a radical transformation of the existing provision to establish a rights-based

child protection system and the coordination of intersectoral and multidisciplinary actions at national and subnational levels to guarantee child rights. The law entered into force in November 2022, but its budgeting is still pending. UNICEF will continue working with the Government to implement the law in the coming years.

As part of this reform, UNICEF contributed significantly to the **de-institutionalization effort and the development of the first ever alternative care system** in Panama. As a result, about **10% of institutionalized children were returned safely to a family environment**. Together with the NGO RELAF (Red Latinoamericana de Acogimiento Familiar), the country office provided technical assistance to SENNIAF and the Ministry of Social Development to create a national methodology for analysis and case management, in line with international standards. This new methodology is now used for the return of institutionalized children to a family environment and the prevention of unnecessary family separation in 16 institutions, before its scaling up at national level. The Grupo Elite, a task force established by the Government, reviewed all the files of 189 children living in public institutions, who now have a plan for their return. Already 127 children have left institutions and live with families.

Together with the Lumos Foundation, UNICEF worked with the national authorities to develop **technical and operational guidelines for the family foster care programme** at national and subnational levels, which were validated nationwide. For the first time in Panama, 10 foster care families have been identified.

Together with SENNIAF and the Ministry of Social Development, UNICEF is supporting the **introduction of Primero, an online platform developed by UNICEF to support case management and the generation of data in child protection**. The objective is that child protection services will use Primero to establish a comprehensive diagnosis and an individualized plan for every child in an institution or at risk of being institutionalized. Ultimately, social services at the community level will use it to identify, support, refer and monitor vulnerable children and their families in the country, as an integral part of the new comprehensive child protection system.

UNICEF conducted **a study of the social service workforce in Panama, with a focus on child protection**. Results suggest further public investment is needed to ensure that more and better trained social workers work more closely with communities to identify vulnerable children, connect them and their families with services and implement preventive programmes. Recommendations from the study are being used to design and implement the model of integrated services at the community level. At the core of the model is the presence of social professionals in every community to identify and support vulnerable children and their families through case management and to strengthen preventive services for children and their families.

Emergency response for children on the move

In 2022, UNICEF provided humanitarian assistance to migrant and refugee and emergency-affected children in transit through Panama and in host Indigenous communities. The country office has a permanent presence in Darien (border with Colombia) and Chiriquí (border with Costa Rica). UNICEF response contributes to the Government's action and was delivered with the support of implementing partners such as HIAS, RET, the Panamanian Red Cross, Children's Villages SOS and Global Brigades. UNICEF is part of the UN Group on Human Mobility and works particularly closely with IOM and UNHCR. The actions described below were made possible through the support of the US Government and the European Union.

UNICEF provided **critical water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services and supplies to over 215,000 people in transit, including more than 35,000 children and adolescents**. In addition, UNICEF repaired and maintained WASH infrastructure in 10 Indigenous host communities affected by the migration flow benefitting over 900 people.

UNICEF reached over **14,145 children and caregivers through child-friendly spaces in migrant reception stations and host communities**. Other child protection services included psychosocial support and community-based protection services for children. **Direct case management support was provided to more than 442 children** at risk of statelessness, survivors of sexual violence, unaccompanied and separated children and families with specific needs. **Over 200 unaccompanied and separated children under protection received alternative care services** through a home-based modality located in the province of Darien.

In 2022, UNICEF strengthened the **gender-based violence response through a survivor-centred approach**, in addition to implementing risk mitigation interventions such as Safe Spaces promoting self-care and providing protection tools to over 2,718 adolescent girls and women, as well as menstrual hygiene activities reaching over 444 girls and women. Prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) mechanisms of implementing partners and other humanitarian actors on the ground were strengthened.

UNICEF delivered **child and maternal health services to over 3,100 children and to pregnant and breastfeeding women** at migration reception stations and host communities.

Throughout the year, with partners, **UNICEF raised awareness of the increase in children on the dangerous jungle route and called for measures to protect them** from violence, exploitation and abuse. UNICEF worked with national authorities for the development of family-based care measures for unaccompanied and separated children, as part of the creation of the foster care system, thus promoting a **humanitarian-development nexus in child protection**.

In 2022, UNICEF raised visibility of the situation of children by organizing and leading high-level donor visits, which contributed to the publication of top international media reports. At the local level, UNICEF coordinates the WASH group, the child protection subgroup and the gender-based violence work. Together with the UN Resident Coordinator, IOM and UNHCR, UNICEF advocated for the development of a coordination mechanism bringing together the Government and all stakeholders involved in the humanitarian response to the migration crisis.

4. Communications and private sector engagement

In 2022, UNICEF **launched an integrated communication campaign on early childhood**. In the first year of this campaign, UNICEF produced and disseminated radio, TV and written media pieces, as well as social media packs and printed banners to raise awareness about ECD.

Key partnerships were established with the public and private sectors to amplify the campaign. UNICEF benefited from the support of MEDCOM, one of the main media corporations in Panama, to co-produce a monthly TV segment on early childhood entitled *Childhood from A to Z* (Niñez de la A a la Z), reaching over 98,000 people per month and positioning UNICEF as a key advocate for child rights. In addition, an interactive exhibition on early childhood took place in four of the main shopping malls, where 1,323 people received information about UNICEF work.

UNICEF also partnered with the key mobile operator and cable TV company +Movil to broadcast spots and disseminate information about the campaign to its customer database, as well as with the transportation company Mi Bus to amplify messages from the campaign in bus stations around the city.

UNICEF continued to engage with citizens and companies to increase awareness and support for children. The number of individual donors increased by over 900% compared with 2021, reaching 2,000 individuals and raising US\$150,000. Several alliances with the private sector contributed to achieving programme results. The public-private partnership with the Ministry of Education and TIGO Panama resulted in various training modules for teachers nationwide, with a focus on soft skills and

technological tools.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF continued to actively contribute to the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) results and UN reforms in Panama, working closely with several UN agencies to promote and protect children's rights. In particular, UNICEF co-leads the UNSDCF result on violence and human rights together with UNHCR. In 2022, the focus was to improve the coordination of UN technical assistance to the independent human rights institution *La Defensoria del Pueblo* and to ensure that humanitarian assistance to migrants and refugees was coordinated.

The country office also contributed to all other UNSDCF Result Groups (access to and quality of basic services; governance and participation; environment and climate change) through its technical assistance to the Government on improving the coverage and quality of education, health, ECD and child protection services, as well as adolescent and youth participation, especially on the issue of climate change.

In 2022, **UNICEF significantly supported UN operational reform** through the improvement of processes for efficiency gain, cost savings, shared services and an innovative Business Operation Strategy. UNICEF contributed to the **Inter-agency Communications Group and programmatic inter-agency groups** including: the gender group, to promote relevant actions in gender equality in collaboration with UN Women, UNFPA, UNDP, OHCHR, IOM and PAHO; and the human mobility group, to coordinate communication on the emergency response in Darien and across the country, in collaboration with UNHCR, IOM, PAHO, UNFPA, UNAIDS, OHCHR and OCHA.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

1. Although Panama is a high-income country, access to quality social services for children is limited, especially in hard-to-reach rural and Indigenous areas. Social, health and education professionals working at community level are key to identify children at risk and ensure that they can access quality services. This is closely connected to the country's efforts to increase decentralization. Therefore, **UNICEF started supporting the national Government in the implementation of a model of integrated community services for children and their families**, in close coordination with the communities themselves and civil society. In 2022, 13 communities in one province and one Indigenous region were selected and committed their support to the model. The Government assigned local professionals to implement this initiative in every community. With support from UNICEF, the Government at national and subnational levels is finalizing the preparation phase to start implementation in March 2023.
2. **A recurring constraint of the humanitarian response in the Darien Gap is guaranteeing the sustainability of interventions**, such as WASH and child protection services, including through a stronger humanitarian development nexus. In 2022, UNICEF transferred a home-based alternative care model for unaccompanied and separated children and any child in need of protection to SENNIAF. The CO will be handing over the maintenance of water services to the government in 2023. UNICEF continues to encourage Government ownership and leadership to support the successful implementation of child protection and other life-saving actions for migrant and refugee children.
3. The last survey on UNICEF brand recognition in Panama showed that while the organization benefits from the trust of those who know it, the recognition level is fairly weak. This undermines the **country office's efforts to advocate for child rights, to raise awareness of issues related to children and to mobilize funding for the country programme**. In addition, the country office has never had a sustained campaign with proven results on behaviours or social change. To respond to these challenges, UNICEF combined all its communications (advocacy, awareness-raising and social change, and fundraising) into an integrated campaign. The focus is ECD as it is one of the three priorities of the cooperation programme and it cuts across all sectors. It will run over four years and will end with a formative evaluation of its results, which are spelled out in a theory of change.