

Philippines

Update on the context and situation of children

The Philippines recorded a 7.6 per cent GDP growth in 2022, showing a strong post-pandemic recovery. The full economic reopening resulted in improved employment at pre-pandemic levels and increased household incomes. Following consultations with UNICEF, the Government has placed child rights among the top agenda of the Philippine Development Plan 2023-2028.

In May 2022, the Philippines elected a new President who prioritized the social sectors in the annual budget with the largest share of 40 per cent. The pandemic left 18 per cent (20 million) in poverty – higher than 16.6 per cent in 2018. Moreover, the global recession, food insecurity, record-high inflation since 2008, and destructive typhoons threaten inclusive growth – affecting poor and vulnerable families and children.

Preliminary findings of the 2022 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) show slightly worsening child mortality between 2017 and 2022, with little improvement among under-5 from 27 to 26 deaths per 1,000 live births, and an increase among infant and neonates from 21 to 22 and 14 to 15 deaths, respectively. This could be attributed to declining antenatal care from 86 per cent to 83 per cent. Although full immunization coverage increased from 70 per cent to 72 per cent, inequities at the sub-national level were noted. The increase in the number of children (12–23 months old) with no routine vaccination is concerning at 11 per cent from 9 per cent. Adolescent health did not fare better as 30 per cent of new HIV/AIDS infections among 15- to 24-year-olds, and mental health is an emerging concern with 17 per cent reporting suicidal ideation.

The Expanded National Nutrition Survey 2022 reported a slight improvement in child nutrition. The Sustainable Development Report 2022 recorded a moderate improvement toward ‘SDG 2: Zero Hunger’ and ‘SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being’,^[i] with major challenges remaining. Stunting and wasting among under-5 children declined from 28.8 per cent to 26.7 per cent and from 5.8 per cent to 5.5 per cent in 2019 and 2021, respectively. Although this is a welcome development, the Philippines remains among the countries with the highest prevalence of stunting globally – a continuing challenge as the Government addresses the long-term effects of stunting among generations of children. Furthermore, overweight increased significantly from 10.4 per cent to 14 per cent in 5- to 10-year-olds and 10.7 per cent to 13 per cent in adolescents 10–19.

Progress in child protection has been slow amid a weak social service workforce, lack of local investments and interventions in child protection, pervasive harmful social and cultural norms, unclear referral, and weak data management systems – resulting in children experiencing violence exacerbated by COVID-19.

For the first time since 1968, the NDHS measured ‘child discipline at home’ for 2022 – a significant step in capturing data on violence against children – and reported that 59 per cent of 1- to 14-year-olds experienced violent discipline. The ‘Disrupting Harm’ study, supported by the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children and conducted by UNICEF, found that of the 13 countries assessed in Africa and Asia, the Philippines registered the highest percentage of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children at 20 per cent, with only 1–4 per cent reporting the violence. Official data show a decline in reporting during COVID-19 lockdowns from 29,349 in 2016 to 16,966 in 2021 amid fears that violence increased because of restrictions.^[ii]

The country felt the effects of the pandemic on education as more schools gradually reopened. Acknowledging that significant learning losses exacerbated the pre-pandemic education crisis, 97.5 per

cent (47,000) of public schools nationwide resumed full in-person classes in late 2022. While the Department of Education is prioritizing the development of a learning recovery plan, traditional challenges for in-person classes have resurfaced such as the lack of basic facilities, overworked teachers, low competency of learners, and child rights violations.

The situation of children in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) deteriorated due to the confluence of crises limiting their access to basic services. The COVID-19 pandemic, sporadic armed conflicts, and natural disasters have affected immunization, nutrition, WASH, education, and child protection in the region. Despite economic growth in the region of 7.5 per cent in early 2022, outcomes for children remain dire: 60 per cent without the first dose of DPT; acute malnutrition at an emergency level of 10 per cent; chronic malnutrition at 39 per cent; access to micronutrient supplementation below 50 per cent; less than 5 per cent of 6- to 23-month-olds with minimum acceptable diet; high anemia at 3.8 per cent to 14.2 per cent; and less than 27 per cent of the municipalities certified open-defecation free.

Children in BARMM were not spared as school closures forced 2.3 million to drop out of school, VAC cases increased and access to life-saving services severely impaired due to restrictive pandemic measures. Children in Mindanao have the highest exposure to grave child rights violations with 83 per cent of the total cases attributed to the presence of armed groups.

Typhoon Rai (local name Odette) entered the Philippines in December 2021 and caused a humanitarian crisis well into 2022 – leaving over 900,000 children in need of humanitarian assistance. UNICEF raised \$16 million out of the needed \$39.8 million to support half a million people, including close to 300,000 children.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its concluding observations released in October 2022,[iii] responded to the Philippines' report on its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child with main concerns and recommendations for stronger measures in rural, remote and conflict-affected areas to address child hunger and malnutrition; protect children against grave violations; continuous learning and safety in schools; and children's participation in national development plans, especially those with disabilities and other vulnerabilities.

[i] Sustainable Development Report 2022:

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2022/2022-sustainable-development-report.pdf>

[ii] Philippine National Police Crime Information Reporting and Analysis System 2021 data

[iii] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of the Philippines:

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FPHL%2FCO%2F5-6&Lang=en

Major contributions and drivers of results

The continuing COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of typhoons, and the restructuring of government processes following the general elections presented challenges to programme implementation in the Philippines. UNICEF responded to these developments by leveraging its 75 years of cooperation with the Government of the Philippines towards significant improvements in children's lives to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Convention on the Rights of the Child, and Philippine Development Plan 2019-2022.

Children and adolescents survive and thrive in a healthy and clean environment

Poor health and nutrition have been preventing children in the Philippines from realizing their full potential. Amid declining immunization coverage, slow progress in addressing malnutrition, and COVID-19 compounding long-standing problems in health and nutrition, UNICEF's work with government and partners in 2022 contributed to strengthening systems that prioritize the needs of children.

Focusing on transformational systemic changes, UNICEF worked to improve prevention and early intervention in all stages of life by strengthening the coordination and delivery of high-impact interventions, data systems, human resources, and community platforms. As a result, key policies that address long-term and sustainable change were developed such as the School Health and Nutrition Services Manual, 7th AIDS Medium Term Plan, Philippine Youth Development Plan, Bangsamoro Development Plan 2023-2028, multi-year strategic plans for immunization, social and behavior change strategies, and guidelines for COVID-19 and routine immunization. These efforts also resulted in the development and implementation of multi-sectoral strategies for early childhood development and WASH.

Moreover, the integrated approach to nutrition strengthened by UNICEF in 2022 placed nutrition at the centre of crucial development frameworks such as the Philippine Development Plan, Primary Health Care, and National Community-Driven Development Program – supporting a financial commitment of US\$178 million from the Government to scale up nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions. UNICEF's support for integrated services reached 350,243 children (180,130 boys; 170,113 girls) and led to significant gains toward a healthy and clean environment.[iv]

UNICEF continued to fill critical gaps in service delivery by supporting immunization catch-up campaigns to reach 353,000 children (14,011 of them in BARMM), training 5,188 frontline workers and 10,801 mothers and caregivers in health, nutrition and social protection services. To support the country's COVID-19 vaccination, UNICEF raised \$7.6 million to provide cold chain equipment to 17 regions, 53 provinces, and 1,120 municipalities and \$9.4 million to support operations. This contributed significantly to the coverage of 73.7 million people (63 per cent) for the primary series by December 2022. These results are a testament to UNICEF's commitment to helping the country recover from COVID-19 and build resilience against future pandemics and other threats to public health.

Children and adolescents continue to learn

Given the setback in the education system experienced by the Philippines in recent years, notably in the last two years of school closure due to the pandemic, the Sustainable Development Report noted a moderate improvement towards 'SDG 4: Quality education', with challenges remaining. UNICEF worked closely with the Department of Education and Department of Health to reopen schools and early learning centres for in-person learning, thus, renewing the focus on learning recovery in the country. The Reach, Assess, Prioritize, Increase and Develop (RAPID) framework, co-developed by UNICEF, is now the major reference of the Government in developing post-pandemic learning recovery policies and programmes.

Through technical assistance from UNICEF, the Government formulated long-term strategies for education in the next 5 to 10 years outlined in the Basic Education Development Plan 2030, the Bangsamoro Education Reform and Development Plan 2035, and the Transforming Education Summit National Statement of Commitment.

UNICEF's continued support of the Early Childhood Care and Development Council played an important role in the safe reopening of early childhood education services nationwide. Since reopening in September, 267 municipalities and cities reported that close to 390,000 children 3–4 years old (78 per cent of UNICEF target) have been attending in-person learning. The NDHS 2022 captured early

childhood development data for the first time and found that only 77 per cent of children 2–5 years old are on track with their development – only 66 per cent of them are in the poorest households compared to 84 per cent in the richest.

Mindful of the greater needs of vulnerable learners, UNICEF supported their learning through improved assessment and referral for developmental delays; increased access to localized and appropriately designed learning resources for over 200,000 learners, including 21,175 with disabilities and those from indigenous groups, early childhood education, multigrade schools, and alternative learning systems; and improved content localization, 21st-century skills development, WASH-Menstrual Hygiene Management, and socio-emotional learning.

Children and adolescents are protected from violence and exploitation

The past year saw some improvements in the system to protect children against violence in the Philippines, a country where young children have only been recently granted protection under the law against child marriage and statutory rape. The most recent UNCRC concluding remarks noted some pieces of legislation in the country addressing VAC. It also expressed its concerns about the high prevalence of all forms of VAC, the increase in online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC), and the lack of support for child victims to access specialized services.

Advocating rights-based policies and legislation for children, UNICEF's support to the Government led to the passage of critical child protection laws such as increasing the age to determine statutory rape from 12 (one of the lowest in the world) to 16 and the Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children and Anti-Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials Act.

In terms of strengthening service provision, UNICEF supported the adoption of the Philippine Plan of Action to End Violence Against Children at the local level – leading to increased allocation in local budgets to improve programmes that address VAC and OSAEC in 14 local governments. To complement this, UNICEF and partners expanded the teleCPUs (remote child protection units) to critical areas in the Cordilleras, Cebu Province, and Davao del Norte to ensure the continuity of the management of VAC cases.

Believing firmly in the crucial role of children and young people, UNICEF Philippines engaged and worked with over 7,000 children and adolescents to address harmful social norms on violence which led to co-created strategies to end violence in communities through preventive and responsive interventions.

Leaving no child behind, UNICEF developed protocols to safeguard children in situations of armed conflict for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), the Philippine National Police, and the Commission on Human Rights. The implementation of the AFP-UN Strategic Plan to Prevent and Respond to Grave Child Rights Violations in Situations of Armed Conflict led to over 3,000 military personnel being trained in implementing the Children in Situations of Armed Conflict Act at all levels.

Children and adolescents have an equitable chance in life

UNICEF continued to work with the Government to make the situation of children and their families visible in public policy while the country embarks on its new medium-term development plan and recovers from the pandemic.

Responding to preliminary findings on the effects of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups, specifically children living with disabilities, UNICEF supported the Department of Social Welfare and Development in conducting and launching the 'Cost of Raising Children with Disabilities' study which shed light on the deprivations and inequities experienced by children with disabilities. Results showed that children with disabilities incur 40 to 80 per cent extra costs compared to children without

disabilities. The data gathered and the evidence generated is critical in informing Congressional debates around disability allowance and interventions to address the needs of these vulnerable children.

UNICEF worked with the Department of the Interior and Local Government and Department of Health on a series of policy guidelines to address the impact of public health emergencies on most at-risk populations including children, women and poor families – ensuring their inclusion in the local government’s planning in anticipation of future pandemics.

UNICEF engaged close to 300 children in a series of child-led consultations on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Report, 2022 Voluntary National Review of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the legislative agenda for the 19th Congress in the Philippines to ensure that the voices of children and adolescents are heard in public policy. To further institutionalize child and youth participation in resilience-building, UNICEF and partners launched the *Kabataang* (Youth) Resilient Programme, together with 175 (93 females; 82 males) in-person and 600 online participants, to provide platforms and opportunities to exercise their right to thrive in a safe and resilient community.

Children and adolescents in the Bangsamoro Region

The work of UNICEF and partners on risk communications and community engagement for COVID-19 improved vaccination in BARMM. Leveraging its partnership with the Ministry of Health, UNICEF continued to support the strengthening of the immunization programme for both COVID and routine vaccination by providing cold storage equipment. This support helped increase the region’s storage capacity for vaccines – helping increase coverage, especially in hard-to-reach areas where vaccine transportation and storage are problematic.

Addressing learning loss, UNICEF played a crucial role in the reopening of schools and learning centers in BARMM by working closely with the Government in developing strategies to handle the safe reopening of schools. Following the consultations at the Transforming Education Summit, a key initiative of the United Nations Secretary-General to transform education, UNICEF supported the BARMM Ministry of Education to lead the region’s response to the global call for action by engaging over a thousand stakeholders that included Government Ministers, School Boards, local government officials, education leaders, teachers, parents, children and adolescents and children in formulating strategies to prepare learners for the future, ensuring inclusion and equity, expanding and empowering teachers, reimagining education governance, and ensuring adequate funding for education and early learning in the region.

After three years of development, the Bangsamoro Education Reform and Development Plan 2035 was launched by the Ministry of Education with support from UNICEF and UNESCO. The results from the summit consultations were included in the final document, making the plan more comprehensive and adaptive to the changing situation in BARMM.

UNICEF also supported the completion of the assessment on child protection, justice for children systems and social service workforce in BARMM which had been instrumental for the Ministry of Social Services and Development to identify their priority priorities, influence the Bangsamoro Development Plan 2023-2028, and improve the quality and reach of social services for vulnerable children and families. UNICEF also supported youth-led civic engagement activities reaching 9,079 (4,449 females; 4,630 males) to influence the Plan and capacitate the Bangsamoro Youth Parliament to craft policy recommendations for inclusion in legislation.

UNICEF monitored 22 cases of grave violations affecting 27 children (21 boys; 6 girls), with 19 cases verified, highlighting the volatility of the ongoing peace process.

Typhoon Rai Response

In December 2021, Super Typhoon Rai hit the Philippines, causing over 400 deaths and injuries and leaving over 2 million people in a humanitarian crisis. UNICEF and partners responded by rolling out the Humanitarian Cash Transfer Plus reaching close to 7,000 households through two of the Government's social protection programmes *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps) and the Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situation (AICS). This assistance was not limited to the distribution of cash as it included the provision of information sessions on child protection, health and nutrition, adolescent health and WASH.

By the end of the response in December 2022, UNICEF reached 103,499 children (51,785 boys; 51,714 girls) with measles vaccines; 156,579 women and children with primary health care services; 376,603 children with screening for acute malnutrition; 1,397 children (768 boys; 629 girls) with treatment for severe acute malnutrition; and 292,270 individuals with emergency WASH infrastructure, supplies, and services.

The high displacement rates heightened the risks of gender-based violence (GBV) and psychosocial and mental health challenges for women and children. Given the need for protection, UNICEF and partners provided support to 29,730 children and caregivers through reporting hotlines and referral mechanisms made widely available.

To ensure that the affected children continue learning, UNICEF contributed to the increased access to education for over 179,418 school children, including early learning, through the provision of school kits, temporary learning spaces, WASH-related interventions, and teacher training in education in emergencies.

[iv] Significant improvements were noted in the coverage of high-impact interventions: vitamin A supplementation (50 per cent to 76 per cent), early initiation of breastfeeding (77 per cent to 82 per cent), diet diversity (18 per cent to 23 per cent), improved source of drinking water (95 per cent to 97 per cent) and decreased open defecation (15 per cent to 16 per cent). *Source: UNICEF 2022 Baseline and Endline Survey: Integrated Nutrition and Health Actions for the First 1,000 Days in Samar, Northern Samar and Zamboanga del Norte.*

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

As the Philippines experienced a full economic reopening in 2022, recovering from learning loss was identified as one of the most significant challenges. UNICEF worked with the UN Education cluster – UNRCO, UNESCO, UNFPA, ILO, UNDP, UNOPS, WFP, UNHCR, UNAIDS, UN Women, ILO, UNIDO – to lead in-country activities for the Transforming Education Summit (TES) in preparing the UN recommendations, facilitating consultations, promoting the TES, and finalizing the TES Country Statement. In partnership with UNESCO, UNICEF provided technical assistance to the development of policies and frameworks for education, including the Basic Education Development Plan 2030 and the Bangsamoro Education Reform and Development Plan 2035, which provide blueprints and targets for the provision of quality, inclusive and equitable education.

The combination of humanitarian crises and the pandemic emphasized the need to strengthen social safety nets for children. Through the UN Joint Programmes on the SDG Fund, UNICEF worked with FAO, UNDP and UNFPA to maximize results for children which led to the successful introduction and roll-out of the humanitarian cash transfer and the development of anticipatory action plans at the sub-national level to support local governments in responding to vulnerable populations in disaster- and conflict-prone areas.

UNICEF tapped its existing partnerships to sustain the achievements toward stronger social protection policies. For example, the Australian Government's flexible contribution to UNICEF's work on social protection enables UNICEF to support the emerging priorities of the Government, particularly in the 4Ps, and reforms initiated by the National Economic and Development Authority. UNICEF's partnership with World Bank and Asian Development Bank on the 4Ps amplified shared messages on nutrition-sensitive social protection and lifted the three-child limit for beneficiaries. This enables reforms to be far-reaching and more sustainable, with UNICEF ensuring an open, accountable and transparent partnership.

To improve child protection systems, UNICEF continued to lead the SaferKidsPH consortium with Asia Foundation and Save the Children in implementing the programme funded by the Australian Government. The three-year partnership has brought different skills and advantages together to address the complexities driving OSAEC and engage the private sector through partnerships with the Australian New Zealand Chamber of Commerce on access to justice and with QBE and the Department of Education to implement the Child Protection Policy in select schools.

This year, UNICEF Philippines concluded Phase I of the First 1,000 Days programme in partnership with the Government of Korea through the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). The partnership provided significant support to the Department of Health and the National Nutrition Council, resulting in the development of national policies and laws for nutrition adopted in areas with a high number of vulnerable families. The participating provinces reached by the programme recorded a decline in low birth weight from 12 per cent to 8.8 per cent. Furthermore, a significant improvement was noted in maternal and child health and nutrition services such as access to antenatal check-ups, postnatal care, and supplementation of iron and folic acid and vitamin A. Following these remarkable results, UNICEF and KOICA have started discussions about Phase II.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Using T4D solutions and government systems for humanitarian cash transfers

The Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian, UNICEF's core policy and framework for humanitarian action, call for the inclusion of social protection in emergency response through the timely provision of humanitarian cash transfers to the affected population using existing government

programmes, where feasible. On one hand, the bureaucracy can delay humanitarian cash assistance. On the other hand, working within established government systems promotes cooperation and ownership. Further, because it is cost-efficient, this approach is sustainable for UNICEF as it works with the Government through existing programme structures and supports systems strengthening, especially when donor support phases out.

In the Philippines, cash assistance is distributed through the national 4Ps and AICS and the Ministry of Social Welfare's cash transfer programme in BARMM. Since these programmes have been running for quite some time with varying success, UNICEF worked with the Department of Social Welfare and Development and the Land Bank of the Philippines to integrate humanitarian cash assistance for shock-responsive social protection. This was tested during the country's response to Typhoons Rai and Nalgae in late 2021 through 2022, with UNICEF introducing the Humanitarian Cash Operations and Programme Ecosystem (HOPE) to the Government to provide post-distribution monitoring and the use of SMS-based payment verifications.

The Philippines is the first country in East Asia and the Pacific to use HOPE, UNICEF's management information system that can collect beneficiary data; associate data with cash programmes; create a database of the target population; manage payment lists and send them to financial service providers (FSPs); reconcile payments; triangulate payment verification information directly from beneficiaries; and handle grievances and feedback.

As a result, HOPE was able to facilitate the deduplication of beneficiaries to ensure a more accurate beneficiary list for payout. The system integrates open-source solutions and existing tools within the UN, such as UNHCR's CashAssist, becoming a payment management solution to handle financial information and safely transfer them to FSPs. The challenge was in the interoperability with the CashAssist payment module which posed challenges during the actual run of several payouts. Learning from this experience, UNICEF continues to refine HOPE and develop its payment module for a more efficient execution during emergency response.

Supporting systems strengthening for humanitarian response and preparedness

The Philippines experiences an average of 20 typhoons a year – four to five of them cause humanitarian crises beyond the Government's capacity. UNICEF supports the country's response to and preparedness for emergencies through risk-informed approaches and strengthens the capacities and systems of government and CSO partners, particularly to support sector leadership and governance in planning, budgeting, capacity building, cluster coordination and information management.

One of the most urgent needs during disasters is meeting the nutritional needs of displaced children whose access to nutrition supplements and services is severely limited, if not cut off altogether, for indefinite periods. Responding to this need entails an integrated, multi-sectoral approach where resources are pooled together to deliver critical assistance, especially for very young children in the Philippines where malnutrition is a chronic problem and worsens during emergencies.

Learning from past emergency responses, UNICEF worked closely with the Department of Health and the National Nutrition Council (NNC) to fully integrate Nutrition in Emergencies (NIE) into the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management in Health plans of all UNICEF-supported municipalities, resulting in 100 per cent institutionalization of nutrition in the DRRM-H plan for Eastern Visayas. On a bigger scale, UNICEF provided technical assistance to NNC in developing the NIE Strategic Plan 2023-2028.

The integrated, multi-sectoral approach includes equally robust WASH infrastructure interventions through strengthened local government systems which UNICEF supported by creating and capacitating *barangay*-level WASH committees with dedicated sanitation focal persons who advocate and lobby for WASH priorities. As a result, Zero Open Defecation (ZOD) verification, declaration, and monitoring

policies were developed locally. This is important because ZOD communities strengthen the DRRM programme by ensuring that restored WASH services will function during the next typhoon or emergency. In Caraga, one of the hardest hit regions by Typhoon Rai, three municipalities and 53 barangays are now ZOD.

Furthermore, to ensure effective coordination in future response and strengthen preparedness, UNICEF supported the creation of multi-sectoral coordination groups in Rai-affected areas that are also disaster-prone: Child Protection-GBV-Education-WASH Group in Dinagat Islands; a GBV-Protection Group in Southern Leyte; and provincial Education Clusters in Caraga and Southern Leyte. These groups created platforms for convergence and prompt referrals and were found to be more strategic, impactful, and sustainable in emergency contexts. Furthermore, UNICEF integrated measures on preventing sexual exploitation and abuse into its response.

UNICEF conducted an After-Action Review of its Typhoon Rai response to continuously support system strengthening. The review recommends critical actions for UNICEF to reinforce government capacities, particularly at provincial and municipal levels, in (i) child-centered preparedness and response, (ii) quality response including timeliness, comprehensiveness of the assistance provided, attention to gender equality aspects, disability and inclusion, equity, monitoring and reporting; and (iii) institutionalize child-centered preparedness through local policies, budgets and existing structures.