

## Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)

### Update on the context and situation of children

For the third year running since the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, prevention measures introduced by the Government of DPRK in January 2020 continue to significantly impact UNICEF's operations and programme delivery. Throughout 2022, there was no access to DPRK for UNICEF's international team, which continued to work primarily from Bangkok in Thailand, providing remote support to programme activities facilitated through the committed efforts of UNICEF's national seconded staff inside DPRK. While cross-border movement of personnel was not possible, border restrictions for supplies eased for periods of the year, especially in the third and fourth quarter, allowing for an increase in importation of critical humanitarian supplies compared to 2021. Nonetheless, several incoming shipments of supplies were subject to lengthy quarantine and disinfection processes upon arrival, in some cases lasting upwards of 2-3 months, before being dispatched to beneficiaries.

The Government of DPRK officially declared a COVID-19 outbreak in May 2022, followed by an announcement that the outbreak had been eradicated in August 2022. This situation, coupled with additional outbreaks of COVID-19 in Dandong, China, a key hub for supplies en route to the DPRK, further disrupted supply flows across the border. The rail route between China and the DPRK which had briefly opened between February and April 2022 closed again until August and new measures and regulations on import and transit of goods via China, including vaccines, were introduced.

These constraints contributed to specific challenges for children in the DPRK, not least related to recurrent stockouts of essential supplies including vaccines for routine immunization, therapeutic foods to combat malnutrition and other essential drugs and medicines.

In 2022, no children were vaccinated against measles/rubella (MR), polio or tuberculosis (TB) nor were any pregnant women immunized against tetanus/diphtheria (Td) as a result of continued stockouts in the routine immunization programme. The coverage of the national immunization programme subsequently dropped significantly compared to 2020 and 2021. The global benchmark for vaccination coverage (DTP3) dropped to 0 per cent from 40 percent in 2021 and 97 per cent in 2020. There have now been stockouts of inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) since March 2021, Pentavalent and MR vaccines since June 2021, Td vaccine since December 2021, Bacillus Calmette-Guerin (BCG) vaccine since January 2022 and Hepatitis B vaccine since June 2022. Approximately 296,000 children received one dose of DTP3 vaccine with a single shipment brought into the country in February, which enabled a catch-up campaign to be implemented in September - however this falls short of the required two doses for full protection. There is thus an elevated risk of outbreaks of vaccine preventable diseases, with an estimated 500,000 children having missed out on routine immunization since 2020.

Some progress was reported on other child health indicators during 2022, based on government-provided data. By the third quarter of the year, the proportion of children suffering from diarrhoeal disease and treated with oral rehydration salts had reached 80 per cent, compared to an annual figure of just 14 per cent in 2021 – an increase reflecting the availability of new supplies in 2022.

The national TB programme, supported by the Global Fund, continued to enrol, support, and treat identified patients in 2022, with treatment coverage of 86.74 per cent reported against the 9-month target of 95 per cent, a small increase compared to 2021. A malaria blood examination rate of 0.37 per cent was reported in the 9-month period to September 2022 against a target of 1.92 per cent, similar to

that of 2021.

According to government data, the number of institutional deliveries has remained high since 2020 and even improved slightly in 2022 at 95 per cent – indicating that COVID-19 has not had a direct impact on the number of deliveries, although the quality of related maternal healthcare is presumed to have decreased due to a lack of essential equipment and drugs as well as a suspension on capacity building activities.

The situation for children suffering from severe or moderate acute malnutrition remained a key concern, with insufficient stock of nutritional products in 2022 to adequately treat every child affected. Only 1 in 10 children with acute malnutrition received standard treatments by the third quarter of the year, compared to 1 in 3 in 2020 and more than 9 in 10 children in 2019.

More than 1.5 million children under-five missed out on vitamin A supplementation for the second year in a row, although at least 400,000 aged 6-23 months benefitted from one round of micronutrient powder supplementation covering six months; an improvement since 2021 when no child received any supplementation. Only 112,000 pregnant and lactating women received multiple micronutrient tablets, representing 35 per cent of the planned target.

The lack of international staff presence inside the country throughout the year left the humanitarian system reliant solely on government provided data. The Child Data Management Unit (CDMU) in the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) continued to provide data sets on updated key child rights indicators every quarter – the main resource for assessing the extent of access for women and children to health and nutrition services and support response planning. Additional data from programme locations was received through an interim model of remote monitoring of health and nutrition interventions in 25 counties in four different provinces. The Country Office developed programme-specific interim monitoring tools, including monitoring questions, checklists and guidelines across WASH, health and nutrition sectors and is now receiving regular detailed reports on programme implementation including status of supplies as well as quality of delivery and technical capacity of relevant service providers. Reports from 2022 indicated that further capacity development of health care workers and replenishment of equipment are required for optimal quality delivery of health and nutrition programmes. Considering no field trips were conducted in 2020 and only a very limited number in 2021 as a result of in-country travel restrictions, 2022 represented a breakthrough in scope and volume of remote monitoring activities.

## Major contributions and drivers of results

Despite the constraints created by the COVID-19 prevention measures in place throughout the year, UNICEF maintained efforts to deliver health, nutrition, water and sanitation programmes for women and children in partnership with the Government, focusing on the prioritisation of critical humanitarian programming in the absence of its full team inside the DPRK.

UNICEF was able to increase the value of its supplies entering the DPRK compared with 2021 and 2020. In total during 2022, some US\$ 7.15 million of critical supplies were imported by UNICEF to the DPRK, compared to just over US\$ 5.4 million in 2021. As of end December 2022, just under US\$ 7 million of the US\$ 19 million of supplies scheduled for delivery at the time of the border closures were still awaiting importation, with some pending supplies reallocated to other countries to avoid wastage.

Particular focus was placed on addressing the major stockouts and limited availability of health supplies and commodities including vaccines, therapeutic foods, oral rehydration salts with zinc, insecticides for malaria control and TB diagnostic kits and drugs.

Vaccine importation was accelerated, resulting in more than 296,300 doses of Pentavalent vaccine being shipped to the DPRK in February 2022 and released from quarantine and disinfection in July 2022. An immediate vaccination campaign was undertaken in 13 provinces, with 296,310 children who missed the DPT 1 dose vaccinated with one dose over a 5-day period.

A total of 32,860 vials of BCG vaccines, 69,050 vials of measles/rubella vaccine, 43,330 vials of tetanus vaccine, 17,400 vials of IPV polio vaccine, and a further 542,100 vials of Pentavalent vaccine were delivered by rail to the DPRK in late-November 2022 and cleared from quarantine processes within one month. This shipment of vaccines could provide at least one dose of each vaccine for between 540,000 and 690,000 children and Td vaccine for as many as 430,000 pregnant women. The Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) plans to conduct a multi-antigen catchup campaign in January 2023 to reach children who have missed their routine vaccinations.

UNICEF supported the MoPH to conduct the cascade training for 446 immunization staff at county level and 7,237 immunization doctors at Ri health facility level to strengthen their skills in effectively managing the multi-antigen vaccination campaign and counselling caregivers on identifying possible adverse effects from the vaccines, and how to seek support from health facilities for response to such effects. These trained staff will be mobilized for the catchup campaign planned for January 2023.

In 2022, service delivery for maternal and new-born health and Integrated Management of New-born and Child Illnesses (IMNCI) was to a large extent maintained, despite limited availability of life-saving medicines throughout the year. The oral rehydration salts, emergency medical kits and midwifery kits shipped to the DPRK in December 2021 and February 2022 helped to sustain the availability of supplies for the programme in 2022.

While the absence of international expertise in-country prevented capacity building activities for basic and comprehensive emergency obstetric care (BEmONC and CEmONC), midwifery kits shipped to the DPRK in early 2022 played an important role in preventing stockouts of some lifesaving medicines and commodities for the programme. Additional supplies including clinical equipment, furniture and medicines for maternal health programmes were procured in 2022 and are expected to arrive in early 2023.

The national TB and malaria programme supported by the Global Fund continued to provide prevention, diagnostics and treatment for TB and malaria in 2022. The programme achieved a TB treatment coverage of 86.74 per cent achieved against the 95 per cent target. The malaria blood examination rate was 0.37 per cent, falling short of the target of 1.92 per cent due to stockouts of reagents for malaria blood tests. In 2022, the importation of TB diagnostic kits, categorized as a dangerous goods (DGs), proved challenging, with new policies and regulations on this category of goods introduced by both China and the DPRK. Due to these changes, UNICEF was unable to finalize the importation of insecticides, which remain a critical component for prevention of malaria, and identified other countries to receive these supplies to avoid wastage and financial loss.

Primary health care services were supported during the year, despite the challenges to importing supplies, with more than 1,850 health facilities in 50 designated priority counties (covering over 5 million people including over 600,000 children under the age of five) receiving over 1,000 essential medicine kits, more than 2,000 cartons of oral rehydration salts and 70 midwifery kits estimated to have benefitted over 3,500 pregnant women.

In anticipation of the challenges in importing supplies, the planned target for treatment of severe acute malnutrition (SAM) cases was reduced at the beginning of the year by 50 per cent, to just over 21,000 children. In 2022, 16,285 children under five with severe acute malnutrition (SAM) were admitted to UNICEF-supported nutrition programmes. Of these, 10,923 received standard treatment and care with Ready-to-Use Therapeutic food (RUTF) supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and

Cooperation (SDC) across 189 Community Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM) sites.

Children with SAM received full treatment with RUTF in the first half of the year, but as stocks began to reach their expiry date some nutritional supplies were distributed as supplemental food for children with moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) to prevent wastage. From August onwards, CMAM sites again faced a stockout of all therapeutic foods, and children suffering from malnutrition were treated with alternative non-standard feeding support provided by the Government, including cows' and goats' milk, in the absence of F100 and F75 therapeutic milk and therapeutic spreads. There is not enough information presently to determine the effectiveness of these alternative treatments.

A total of 48,974 children were identified with moderate acute malnutrition in 2022 but no full, standard treatment for children with MAM could be provided due to shortages of therapeutic foods in the country.

At least 401,226 of an estimated 500,000 children aged 6-23 months (80.2 per cent) benefited from one round of micronutrient powder supplementation (MNP) covering six months, although MNP distributions should provide children with at least two rounds of supplementation each year. In 2022, more than 1.5 million children again missed out on vitamin A supplementation for a third year in a row due to non-availability of vitamin A. In the maternal nutrition programme, more than 198,500 women receiving folic acid supplementation in five provinces, reaching at least 5.8 per cent of women of childbearing age in the country. Additionally, 112,000 pregnant and lactating women from a targeted 316,000 received multiple micronutrient tablets, representing about 35 per cent of the planned target.

By combining remote technical inputs from international staff outside the country and the use in-country of recently updated national CMAM and IMNCI guidelines, UNICEF was able to support the capacity strengthening of 112 paediatricians from 35 counties and provincial paediatric hospitals who attended integrated refresher training course on Community-based Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM) and Integrated Management of Neonatal and Childhood Illness (IMNCI). UNICEF considered such training to be critical to maintaining quality of life-saving programmes and in line with its prioritisation of essential humanitarian activities.

Data provided by CDMU and followed up with provincial and county level CMAM supervisors allowed for some data analysis and triangulation, highlighting the challenges for provinces in identifying all cases with acute malnutrition. Only two counties have been able to reach at least 75 per cent of their annual target based on the estimated caseload, while three provinces reached less than 50 per cent of their target cases. The remaining provinces delivered variable performance between 50 and 67 per cent. Data on children under six months old admitted to the programme, as well as more specific data on number of new cases, weight gain and length of stay in the programme, remain unavailable from CDMU and MoPH. This data is important in determining the quality of the programme. Based on available information and persistent breaks in supply of standard treatments, UNICEF believes that the quality of the CMAM programme continues to decline.

The draft National Nutrition Strategy finalized in 2021 remained unapproved, despite repeated efforts by UNICEF to support the Ministry of Public Health in the process, as the Government remained concerned that there were insufficient multisector approaches within the strategy. The stagnation in the process underlines the constraints of international staff remaining outside the country, as more focused and concerted engagement could have been possible had international expertise been more readily available to government partners

In 2022, UNICEF was able to import a first consignment of seven wagons of long-delayed water, sanitation, and hygiene supplies into the DPRK taking advantage of the railway opening with China between February and April 2022. These included emergency standby supplies such as soap and water storage items. A further 29 wagons of water and sanitation supplies arrived in the DPRK in November

2022 and are undergoing quarantine and disinfection processes. Once these offshore components have been distributed to project sites, an estimated 123,000 people will benefit from the completion of eight ongoing water supply projects. Other supplies that were brought into the country include soap, jerry cans and hygiene kits sufficient for 74,000 people that have been pre-positioned for emergency response. A large quantity of water, sanitation and hygiene supplies remain in China awaiting transportation in 2023. Once these supplies are imported, UNICEF will be able to complete all 19 ongoing water supply projects in the DPRK.

Programme monitoring and situation analysis have faced notable challenges since both internal and external travel restrictions were put in place in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the temporary exit of international staff. However, UNICEF made major strides towards regular programme monitoring in 2022 through the effective implementation of remote monitoring plans covering all health, nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) activities.

Throughout 2022, engineers from the Ministry of Urban Management (MoUM) have been regularly visiting WASH project locations, completing monitoring checklists, providing photographic evidence of the construction work and delivering onsite technical support. During the year, UNICEF received 10 monitoring reports covering all 19 ongoing projects in eight different provinces. In addition to the project monitoring, the MoUM engineers also provided training on operation and maintenance of water supply networks, and promotion of sanitation and hygiene to local officials, technicians and community members in charge of hygiene promotion.

The Government of the DPRK participated for a second year in the regional WASH in Schools International Learning Exchange Event, organized by the UNICEF Regional Office for East Asia and the Pacific. This underlined the importance of maintaining even limited technical and policy-level engagement, despite the constraints on access to and from the country, and the DRK participants noted that the 2022 event provided a good forum through which to exchange experiences, plans and challenges and learn good practices, as well as helping strengthen the collaboration with UNICEF to progress towards achieving SDGs 4 and 6.

Similarly, UNICEF worked with the MoPH to finalize a joint remote monitoring plan and schedule for health and nutrition programmes, with field visits starting in July 2022. A team of four national consultants were tasked to conduct full-time integrated monitoring of health and nutrition activities in the 50 priority counties with the findings presented in quarterly reports. Since its initiation, 25 counties in four provinces have been visited. The monitoring covers provincial and county warehouses, health facilities and CMAM sites to assess the availability and status of UNICEF-provided supplies, storage conditions, availability of health equipment for implementation of IMNCI and CMAM programmes, water and sanitation services and the overall condition of the facilities. The monitoring checklists also contain questions related to the quality of programme implementation and availability of skilled health care workers. Following the monitoring of each province a review meeting was held to discuss key observations and recommendations with CMAM and IMNCI focal points.

In 2022, UNICEF finalized a Country Programme Evaluation (CPE) for the DPRK covering the period 2017-2021. Due to travel restrictions, the evaluation was conducted remotely by an external consultant, with a primary objective of assessing both pre- and post-COVID performance, assessing the effectiveness of programme strategies, and providing insights to and recommendations for the planning of the next UNICEF DPRK Country Programme. Due to limitations of data collection and the absence of any recently conducted surveys or assessments, the evaluation focused on the relevance and importance of specific programme interventions rather than on the overall impact of results achieved.. The evaluation did collect some primary data through questionnaires and surveys and engaged and received feedback from the Government on the collaboration and partnership with UNICEF. Overall, the evaluation found that the Country Programme remained relevant to meet the most pressing needs of the country but that continued advocacy and improved evidence-based targeting are important to

ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable children are being addressed. Key recommendations included the need to expand the focus on, improve knowledge management, renew focus on policy level support and capacity development and refine the convergence county approach.

## UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF remained active within the UN Country Management Team and Humanitarian Management Team and made major contributions to the development of the 2023 UN Response Plan. This entailed close collaboration with several UN and non-governmental partners and complemented UNICEF's role as lead of the WASH Cluster Working Group, the Nutrition Sub-Cluster and in supporting leadership of the Health Cluster with the World Health Organization (WHO). UNICEF also strengthened its engagement with the UN Operations Management Team for better coordination on common policies and approaches, including leading a long overdue review and alignment of daily subsistence allowance rates for Government partners, an issue which had created delays in some programme implementation.

In collaboration with WHO and Gavi, UNICEF supported the development of the 2023 Targeted Country Assistance (TCA) plan for strengthening the DPRK immunization programme. Two external experts were also contracted through the Global Fund supported programme to work on National Strategic Plans for both the country's TB and malaria programmes.

The Global Fund remained a critical partner to UNICEF in the DPRK, and UNICEF worked closely with the Fund to ensure timely sharing of data on programme implementation and undertake advocacy with government partners to accelerate programme and supply delivery wherever possible. Considering the challenging operational circumstances which has delayed programme implementation, UNICEF worked closely with the Global Fund to develop a grant closure plan which provides an additional timeframe to complete implementation of activities, including distribution of already procured supplies and monitoring of programme activities with limited human resources support until the end of 2023 and the next potential funding cycle from 2024 onwards.

UNICEF with support from the UN Partnership on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNPRPD) and in coordination with the Office of the UN Resident Coordinator and an expert consultant, conducted an updated situation analysis on persons with disabilities in the DPRK, mainly based on available secondary data. Additionally, 12 international staff from four UN agencies working in the DPRK were trained on disability inclusive programming after a training needs assessment. It is expected that the findings of the situation analysis will be integrated into the next Common Country Assessment report and support the development of further disability inclusion in the next United Nations Sustainable Cooperation Framework (UNSCF).

UNICEF devoted considerable attention to engagement with funding partners, including grant management and oversight to ensure that communication with donors was timely and strategic in nature, to safeguard existing funds and increase the potential for continued collaboration with partners. In close collaboration with UNICEF Supply Division, UNICEF China and the DPRK authorities, UNICEF DPRK was able to import US\$ 7.15 million worth of supplies during 2022. These supplies have been predominantly funded through grants which were previously extended due to the operational context, but which reached expiration in December 2022.

## Lessons Learned and Innovations

Under the challenging operational circumstances, UNICEF maintained close dialogue with its resource partners in order to manage expectations, extend activity periods as well as re-programme funds to meet emerging challenges and address identified gaps. Moving forwards, a key challenge for 2023 will be covering the enormous funding gap for programme activities, given that no significant new contributions were received in 2022. UNICEF's projected budget for 2023 is \$23 million, of which

US\$ 17 million has yet to be secured. A concerted resource mobilization effort will be required to maintain critical life-saving programmes inside the DPRK and to ensure that progress made during the current country programme is maintained to the extent possible.

The complex supply operation in 2022 relied on creative and agile logistics management, for example by adjusting traditional freight processes such as the introduction of temperature-controlled containers to ensure integrity and quality of supplies that could be affected by uncertain timelines for quarantine and disinfection processes, and proactively engaging key players at all stages of the dynamic supply chain from manufacturers to the Government. A supply tracking tool developed by UNICEF DPRK has enhanced office's ability to prioritize the importation of supplies based on product and grant expiration, which allowed for timely communication with relevant Ministries to better prioritize the allocation of wagons and vessels with respect to these criteria.

UNICEF devoted considerable attention to improving compliance with critical organizational processes and structures such as the Harmonised Approach to Cash Transfers, and the use of online structures for asset and contract management, which had been inconsistently applied since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A series of training sessions and orientations for international and national seconded staff proved valuable in ensuring better understanding of processes and individual accountabilities.

In response to a Country Programme Evaluation recommendation to improve knowledge management, the office created a new online document management repository structure and continues to prioritize staff learning and development opportunities.

UNICEF worked closely with the Office of the UN Resident Coordinator and other UNCT members to find innovative solutions to the lack of an international banking channel in the DPRK, a result of the global sanctions regime, by expanding 'swap' arrangements whereby the UN agreed to provide funds to DPRK Government institutions outside the country, in return for an equivalent deposit in local currency to UN agencies' accounts in Pyongyang. This allowed UNICEF to cover a limited number of critical programme and operational support activities for 2022, including costs of local data collection, monitoring of implementation of activities on the ground, small-scale training activities and office running costs.

Remote monitoring capacity was greatly expanded in 2022 and the tools and checklists developed have provided detailed information on status of supplies, the quality of programme implementation and identify key gaps in capacity development. The investment in remote monitoring as a temporary measure in the absence of international staff in-country has been vital in efforts to maintain donor confidence in UNICEF's programme inside the DPRK. The design of the monitoring approach across different sectors such as health and nutrition has enabled a further platform for integration of capacity development and supervisory activities, helping to break down silos and align guidelines and training for a more holistic approach to programme interventions. The completion of a remote Country Programme Evaluation using paper-based questionnaires and surveys addressed the lack of access to online communication platforms by DPRK partners and provided another avenue for limited remote data collection.

Looking ahead, the lack of real-time, disaggregated data will prove challenging in developing a new Country Programme for the DPRK, a process which will potentially get underway in 2023. A return of the full UNICEF team to the country will be essential to build an accurate picture of needs, opportunities and possible innovations and partnerships that will define the strategic approach in coming years.