

Iraq

Update on the context and situation of children

Iraq is categorized as an upper-middle income country, with a GDP per capita of US\$4,775 in 2021 (World Bank). GDP growth accelerated in the first half of 2022 to 10.5 per cent thanks to surging oil prices which pushed Iraq's international reserves to their highest level in over two decades, in addition to recovering economic activity after the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank Iraq Economic Monitor, November 2022).

However, inflation, rising food prices, and the persisting impact of COVID-19 have exacerbated poverty and food insecurity in 2022, and Iraqi children and young people faced multiple deprivations that increase exclusion and drive intergenerational poverty. One in two children suffer two or more deprivations of basic rights, while years of insecurity and the socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic increased child poverty to 37.9 per cent (UNICEF, World Bank, OPHI, Ministry of Planning, 2020). Social protection schemes remain highly fragmented, with many of the most vulnerable families and children unable to access support.

A year-long political deadlock came to an end in October 2022, with the appointment of a prime minister. Most of the year was characterized by political instability and protests, particularly in Baghdad and Basra, affecting public investments in the social sectors and service provision for children and young people, while also limiting UNICEF staff mobility, which required utilizing temporary programme monitoring approaches. While government formation created the conditions for progress, an election is planned in 2023 which may lead to further instability.

The humanitarian situation in Iraq is largely a legacy of the 2013–2017 conflict, which caused an influx of Syrian refugees followed by the displacement of over 6 million Iraqis. At the start of the year, an estimated 2.5 million people, including 1.1 million children, were in need of humanitarian assistance, including in-camp and out-of-camp internally displaced people (IDPs) and 1.7 million returnees. Additionally, nearly 249,000 Syrian refugees and their host communities were in need of support, including 109,000 children (MENARO Syrian Refugees HAC 2022), mostly in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Key concerns included the need for shelter, winter supplies and child protection, including legal protections, and protection from gender-based violence (GBV), lack of civil documentation, limited access to adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and barriers to accessing education.

Accurate data on the situation of children, young people and women, necessary for evidence-based policies, remains a challenge.

Despite the country's upper-middle income status, Iraq's children face great risks to health and nutrition. The pandemic has impacted on service delivery and demand for services. While over 19.5 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine were administered in Iraq by 21 December 2022, coverage remains low, at 38 per cent. In 2020, only three-quarters of infants received routine immunization, showing further efforts are needed for Iraq to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 (WHO-UNICEF WUENIC estimate). Significant inequities in mortality and undernutrition prevail across governorates, but data are largely unavailable or out of date, posing challenges to advocacy and achieving funding support and government motivation, particularly for nutrition. About 79 per cent of children in early childhood (aged 3–4 years) are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial wellbeing (MICS 2018), requiring accelerated efforts for Iraq to achieve SDG-4.

Iraq faces significant challenges related to climate change, including water scarcity, which impacts on

peace and security throughout the region and globally. The Children's Climate Risk Index classifies Iraq as being at medium-high risk, ranking 61st out of 163 countries (CCRI 2021). Children and young people are vulnerable to water scarcity, air and water pollution, drought, extreme temperatures, flooding and sandstorms, but are engaging in efforts across the country to mitigate climate change impacts on their communities.

Although Iraq is the 42nd most water-stressed country in the world (CCRI 2021), only 27 per cent of wastewater is treated for reuse (MICS 2018). Access to WASH services varies significantly between governorates and between rural and urban areas. Only 60 per cent of the population has access to safely managed drinking water, challenging achievement of SDG-6 (WHO/UNICEF JMP). WASH is governed by outdated policies and legislative frameworks, with weak capacity in the country to sustainably manage limited water resources.

Access to primary education is high, with net enrolment at 91.6 per cent, but 2 million children were out of school even prior to the pandemic (MICS 2018). COVID-19 led to 11 million Iraqi children missing 25 weeks of face-to-face education in 2020/2021 (Iraq Central Statistical Office estimates). Children face greater challenges to access education at other levels, with only 2.4 per cent receiving early childhood education (ECE) (MICS 2018). Enrolment is 57.5 per cent in lower-secondary and 33 per cent in upper-secondary school, and fewer girls transition to secondary school (MICS 2018).

While a large proportion of the population is transitioning into working age, many young Iraqis lack skills or opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. Male and female youth unemployment is estimated at 32.1 per cent and 62.1 per cent respectively (ILO 2022), meaning that Iraq risks missing its demographic window of opportunity for accelerated growth.

Violence, abuse and exploitation in homes, schools and communities are a daily reality for many children, young people and women in Iraq, especially adolescent girls with limited support systems and access to information and services. About 81 per cent of children under 14 have experienced violent discipline (MICS 2018). Children in contact with the law face significant barriers to accessing formal justice systems meeting human rights standards. Challenges are particularly acute for children in conflict, where security considerations typically overrule child rights.

In 2022, over 200 grave violations against children were verified by the Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting, co-chaired by UNICEF, with killing and maiming the most frequently reported violation, with explosive ordnance the leading cause, and boys disproportionately affected.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Through most of 2022, insecurity and political instability posed challenges to achieving results. However, government formation in October created new opportunities for systems strengthening and anchoring the priorities UNICEF had identified in its mid-term review: digitalization, climate change mitigation and adaptation, gender, data and evidence, and the humanitarian-development-peace triple nexus. With the ongoing transition from cluster coordination of humanitarian response towards risk-informed government-led sectoral coordination, there are opportunities to develop domestic capacity, strengthen systems and support government leadership for children.

Every child survives and thrives

High-impact interventions enhanced lifesaving care for newborns. UNICEF advocacy, technical assistance and financial contributions supported the adoption of a policy institutionalizing kangaroo mother care (KMC) in newborn care units of central and teaching hospitals, with nationally disseminated guidelines for health workers. Pre-term and under-weight newborns received lifesaving care following training and equipment from UNICEF to establish KMC units at eight central hospitals.

The lives of an estimated 450 newborns were preserved by staff trained and equipped to resuscitate newborns at 12 referral hospitals. Perinatal death recording was institutionalized in 52 central hospitals with joint UNICEF-WHO support, providing evidence to improve practices and reduce newborn death.

Systems strengthening through digitalization progressed effective and equitable primary healthcare services under government leadership with UNICEF support and COVID-19 funding. This included a National Data Centre established with UNICEF-supported hardware and training, and preparations for DHIS2 roll-out.

Children were facilitated to access services through linked digital birth registration and child health records. UNICEF supported needs-assessments, linked birth registration with health facilities, and provided equipment for 1,600 health facilities and 380 birth registration offices.

An assessment of oxygen management led to guidelines on medical gases, oxygen therapy and intensive neonatal management. Technicians from 45 hospitals and medical staff from 60 hospitals enhanced skills on oxygen therapy for children with UNICEF support.

Institutional strengthening, technical support and policy engagement contributed to the development of a multisectoral ECD strategy (2022–2031) to guide enhanced primary healthcare, nutrition, and education services for all Iraq children. Twenty thousand children under five will receive ECD screening to identify risk factors and receive services in five per cent of primary healthcare centres in Baghdad, Najaf, Basra and Ninawa.

ECD guidelines were an entry point for institutionalizing micronutrient supplementation, with UNICEF advocacy and technical support. About 10,000 children were protected against micronutrient deficiencies using supplements procured by UNICEF, while 90,000 children were screened for stunting and wasting at ECD units with staff trained in anthropometric measurement with UNICEF support. Children diagnosed as malnourished were treated (95 per cent cure rate). Over 6,000 children were treated for malnutrition using UNICEF-procured supplies.

Availability and accessibility of RI services for vulnerable children in IDP, refugee, host and returnee communities was sustained in parallel with COVID-19 vaccination. Routine immunization (RI) saw dramatic progress through the Intensifying Integrated Immunization (3iS) campaign, and was supported by funding for cold-chain development, vaccine procurement, service delivery and demand-creation through communication, community engagement and social and behaviour change (SBC). Children received safe high-quality vaccines through a cold chain strengthened with qualified cold rooms, refrigerators, passive cold chain equipment, and remote temperature sensing. While COVID-19 vaccination coverage remained low overall, at 38 per cent (from 30 per cent for one dose in 2021), the integrated approach contributed to RI coverage of about 90 per cent (DTP3 and measles), the highest in decades. Outreach from 7,600 vaccination teams contributed to 134,000 zero-dose children receiving their first dose of RI.

Eighty-six per cent of Iraq's population gained knowledge on protecting against COVID-19 through SBC initiatives, while 10,000 people were protected through vaccination at religious festivals following advocacy with religious leaders. About 4,000 rumours were tracked and addressed.

Despite severe funding constraints and low prioritization, UNICEF sustained essential nutrition service delivery for children in humanitarian contexts. Over 2 million children benefited from counselling to caregivers on infant and young child feeding. In areas of return in Ninawa and Anbar, 50,000 children under five were screened for malnutrition and treated at nutrition units reactivated using UNICEF supplies.

Every child learns

Institutional strengthening of national systems by UNICEF and development partners led to the draft Iraq National Education Strategy (2022–2031). As the Secretariat of the Education Coordination Working Group, UNICEF used its advocacy and convening power, along with UN and government partners, to support national consultations led by the Prime Minister’s Advisory Commission. These fed into a commitment paper presented at the Transforming Education Summit convened by the UN Secretary-General, aligned with the new strategy and signalling national commitment.

UNICEF’s technical expertise and advocacy strengthened subnational coordination with four new Governorate Education Sector Plans (GESP) under development, accompanied by education sector analyses, costed planning matrices and capacity development for effective implementation, and four older GESPs being updated. This was supported by sectoral collaboration using coordination mechanisms established by UNICEF, and quality assurance by MOE.

UNICEF’s partnership with UNESCO supported systems strengthening through the roll-out of the Education Management Information System (EMIS) in 2,570 schools in Federal Iraq, with 5,163 teachers trained on data entry. In KRI, all schools and preschools instituted EMIS with UNICEF technical support.

Access to learning was supported through institutional strengthening for quality services and SBC to generate demand. Under its Blueprint partnership with UNHCR, UNICEF supported KRI in implementing the Refugee Education Integration Policy, bringing 22,686 refugee children into regular schools, increasing their enrolment by 20 per cent.

UNICEF brought 28,873 out-of-school children (14,527 girls) back to school and supported 7,311 adolescent girls to continue to lower-secondary education (20 per cent increase from 2021). Additionally, 357,072 children in humanitarian situations were able to learn with prefabricated schools and classroom supplies provided by UNICEF, and through Back2Learning SBC campaigns in two governorates.

UNICEF trialled new service delivery modalities for ECE, including a shift away from costly facility-based services. In 2022, 14,235 children (7,114 girls) accessed ECE through UNICEF service delivery, exceeding 2022 targets and reaching nearly twice the figure in 2021. Community demand for these models contributed to Federal Iraq MOE approving and issuing guidelines for school-based and community-based ECE under the new ECD strategy.

A total of 432,575 students (186,007 girls) learned in supportive environments in 1,331 schools that adopted school-based management (SBM), which improves learning outcomes by decentralizing decisions to parents, teachers and school leadership.

UNICEF supported capacity development of teachers to strengthen systems for quality learning. A total of 5,949 teachers (2,515 women) built pedagogical skills and learned to address violence against children and provide psychosocial support. Another 4,000 teachers (1,938 women) were trained on e-pedagogy to teach children unable to learn face-to-face due to emergencies and thus reduce risks of learning loss.

Systems strengthening by UNICEF created scalable pathways for young people to build skills as economic actors. While national capacity to support young people posed challenges, UNICEF drew on virtual and in-person modalities, including Innovation Labs, Governmental Youth Centres, Learning Passport and social media platforms to provide structured pathways for 41,814 vulnerable young people (17,955 girls and women) to enhance employability by learning digital, entrepreneurship and life skills based on the LSCE framework. Another 749 young entrepreneurs (327 girls and women) developed and implemented social and business entrepreneurship initiatives with seed funding

(US\$1,000–2,000).

Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

UNICEF led legal, policy and institutional reform for gender-responsive and age-appropriate child protection through support for systems strengthening, with success driven by consistent advocacy. Policy engagement contributed to the submission of a revised Child Rights Act for approval in KRI. In Federal Iraq the first parliamentary reading of the Child Protection Act took place. These legislations will also fill gaps concerning juvenile justice and the rights of children in conflict.

UNICEF support for institutional reform contributed to the establishment of a child protection unit with designated workforce in KRI. In Federal Iraq, a child protection entity under the Social Protection Commission was approved.

Evidence-based service delivery was enhanced through digitalization via the rollout of child protection and gender-based violence (GBV) management information systems, with training for case workers to register and track cases effectively.

UNICEF's institutional and technical assistance for Justice for Children system mapping in KRI included development of child-friendly court guidelines and a diversion framework. A programme on juvenile justice was integrated into police academy curricula, ensuring that future children in conflict with the law will encounter professionals sensitized to alternatives to detention.

Through UNICEF service delivery and policy engagement, 5,381 children (645 girls) in conflict with the law received child-friendly justice services, and 6,146 children (3,086 girls) gained proof of identity through birth registration and civil documentation. In total, 1,505 children (173 girls) received unconditional release, completed their sentences or were released during pre-trial detention, with active advocacy and legal support from UNICEF and partners.

Support for service delivery through strong government and CSO partnerships, and social service workforce strengthening, contributed to children and women receiving essential protective services and referrals. Overall, 575,966 people (220,305 girls, 127,369 women) benefited from at least one UNICEF-supported child protection or GBV service.

Despite limited funding UNICEF support contributed to secure reintegration services for 2,238 conflict-affected children (1,207 boys, 1,041 girls) and 137 women. About 36,334 people (3,815 women; 16,244 boys; 11,787 girls) learned how to protect themselves against explosive ordnance through a curriculum accredited by the Directorate of Mine Action. UNICEF trialled a programme in Basra, where teachers were trained to deliver awareness-raising sessions to students, and young people to their peers, ensuring sustainability despite funding shortfalls.

Every child lives in a safe and clean environment

Reflecting its strategic priority of child-centred climate change, UNICEF supported institutional strengthening via a government-led Climate Landscape Analysis for Children and Young People. This created an evidence base for risk-informed programming and incorporating child-centred climate change adaptation in government's Green Paper, planned for 2023.

Policy engagement for systems strengthening contributed to institutionalized water safety planning and quality monitoring in KRI, with a water safety plan committee, data centre and digitalized safety plans. In three KRI governorates (Wasit, Kirkuk, Diala), local governments conducted climate risk assessment analyses using the WASH bottleneck analysis tool and environmental surveys. Costed action plans were implemented in all three governorates by the Ministry of Construction, Housing and Public Municipalities (MoCHPM).

About 78,000 pupils learned in hygienic environments at 156 schools, with climate-resilient WASH facilities established with UNICEF support, with continuous water and power supply and digitalized platforms to monitoring water usage. The health of patients and healthcare workers at 39 health facilities was protected through waste treatment units reducing risk of hazardous contamination. This paved the way for service providers to access World Bank funding (US\$25 million) to scale up to 180 primary healthcare facilities. An infection prevention and control assessment of 3,624 healthcare facilities and 19,301 schools was completed through an intersectoral partnership facilitated by UNICEF and WHO, and will form the basis for service improvement plans in 2023.

An additional 1.49 million people gained access to WASH services in 2022 (685,000 children, 760,000 girls and women, 87,500 people with disabilities) through UNICEF-supported systems strengthening, private and public sector partnerships to ensure future sustainability, support for digitalization for effective management, and innovative solutions to water scarcity.

In seven water-scarce governorates which experienced 35 per cent water loss, a 15 per cent reduction in losses was achieved when UNICEF Iraq leveraged the technical knowledge of 120 government staff in water system design, in partnership with the regional office and the Arab Countries Water Utilities Association. Smart city and water billing was adopted by MoCHPM to increase efficiency and revenues in all 15 Federal Iraq governorates through a private-sector partnership leveraging financial and human resources from service providers and ensuring sustainability.

Service delivery through pilots to manage water scarcity showed positive results for children, and were evaluated for their potential to scale. In two water-stressed governorates, 12,000 people (including 5,500 children) accessed improved water supply through climate-resilient technology to harvest rainwater and recharge aquifers, with real-time monitoring. Enough water to add 8,000 Basra households to the network was recovered by eliminating freshwater wastage. UNICEF technical and financial support contributed to protecting 2,268 people (1,050 children) in Bab Sinjar, Mosul and downstream communities from waterborne diseases through safely managed sanitation services and solar-powered wastewater treatment.

As the country transitions from humanitarian to development assistance, UNICEF supported sustainable, durable and cost-effective WASH services in humanitarian contexts, including hygiene promotion for out-of-camp populations and returnees. A total of 119,629 people gained access to sufficient quality water for personal use, while 86,694 people lived in a hygienic environment with sanitation services delivered by UNICEF. UNICEF supported the establishment of WASH Working Groups in Federal Iraq and KRI to coordinate subnational WASH strategies linking development and humanitarian support and evolve into a long-term governance and regulatory framework.

Every child has an equitable chance in life

UNICEF supported evidence generation on child deprivations for informed policymaking and systems strengthening, with the completion of a child-adjusted multidimensional poverty index. This showed that 46.9 per cent of children in Iraq experience multidimensional poverty. It's the findings will keep child deprivation at the centre of national development and poverty reduction planning.

The Government of Iraq's public finance management reforms provided opportunities to mainstream public finance for children (PF4C). UNICEF technically supported child-focused reviews of government spending in three sectors (social protection, education and WASH) which highlighted critical gaps in spending and utilization of resources for children. Digitalization for child-focused policymaking was advanced through the UNICEF-supported development of a dashboard tracking child-focused budget allocations for the Ministry of Finance.

With UNICEF advocacy and communication, high-level coordination of PF4C progressed with a taskforce established, comprising representatives from key ministries. A needs assessment conducted

in 2022 will inform training for social sector decision-makers in Basra and Dohuk in 2023 and establish domestic PF4C expertise.

Under an EU-UN joint programme with WFP and ILO, UNICEF initiated development of the social protection strategy and led a mapping of the social safety net programme's management information system. A system for KRI was developed and piloted in Dohuk during 2022. The work on social protection systems was also supported by Germany through KfW.

An Accountability to Affected Populations strategy was developed with UNICEF support and over 200 implementing partners were trained and toolkits developed to guide programme implementation.

The National Youth Vision 2030 was operationalized in 2022, with UNICEF coordination for the Inter-Agency Working Group on Adolescents and Youth and advocacy for an Inter-Ministerial Committee to accelerate governmental commitments to the youth agenda.

UNICEF support for institutional strengthening, prioritizing gender-transformative approaches, created pathways for young people to participate meaningfully in decision-making: 121,825 (55,690 girls) from 10 governorates applied LSCE to identify issues and lead community initiatives, advocacy and education interventions. Young people led over 2,200 initiatives on topics including environmental protection, climate change, gender, innovation and early marriage, and accessed resources and mentorship to implement them through Innovation Labs and by applying the UPSHIFT approach.

About 4,929 young people (1,718 girls) volunteered for their communities in person through the National Youth Volunteering Programme. UNICEF is now supporting digitalization to expand its reach through online engagement, including through U-Report.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

With limited donor support for humanitarian response in 2022, UNICEF engaged with government and UN agencies to build capacity, support durable solutions under the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, and encourage local authorities to take over key services.

UNICEF co-led the child protection sub-cluster, the education cluster (with Save the Children) and the national education sector coordination group and was a member of the health cluster. Preparing for the deactivation of the WASH cluster in 2023, UNICEF supported the establishment of a WASH working group coordinated by government.

Partnerships with UN agencies amplified advocacy, scaled up interventions and leveraged comparative advantages for results. RI results were supported by WHO technical guidance and UNICEF logistical support. Joint UN advocacy for children in contact with the law contributed to reduced sentences and presidential amnesties. A partnership with ILO and the World Bank expanded UNICEF's focus and support to youth employment and skilling.

Scale-up of perinatal death auditing beyond UNICEF-supported areas, to central hospitals in all directorates of health, was made possible through cost-sharing with sister agencies, while the Blueprint initiative with UNHCR contributed to the implementation of the Refugee Education Integration Policy in 2022, guaranteeing access to primary education for refugee children in KRI.

EMIS expansion emerged from a collaboration with UNESCO under an EU programme. Technical support provided in partnership with UNESCO and World Bank led to the draft Iraq National Education Strategy.

The establishment of a labour monitoring system and validation of child labour standards progressed through capacity development for 175 labour monitors under an ILO partnership. Young people transitioned from learning to the labour market through referrals to ILO-supported entrepreneurship and employment programmes.

Social protection reform and expansion was supported in collaboration with WFP and ILO under the EU-UN Joint Programme on Social Protection. This partnership gained momentum in 2022, introducing disability-friendly reforms, initiating evidence generation, and institutionalizing the Ministry of Planning's coordination role as an effective model for government ownership.

Partnerships contributed to climate-resilient WASH pilots, including a wastewater treatment plant trialled in a UN-HABITAT complex and an agreement to treat wastewater in four UNAMI compounds.

Private sector partners including the Iraqi Banks Association complemented the school greening initiative through plantation and warning systems. Water resource management was improved through capacity building for government staff in all governorates, with training on climate change water safety plans and non-revenue water delivered by Arab Countries Water Utilities Association.

The technical expertise of Zain, a private-sector communication company was leveraged to scale up school greening so school administrations monitored water losses, water consumption and carbon emissions. Communication and advocacy with Zain complemented SBC, engaged youth through U-Report and reached about 2 million people through digital campaigns.

UNICEF partnerships with Iraqi academic institutions built domestic capacity, including institutionalized training on social protection reform with the University of Baghdad, and drawing on the expertise of University of Technology postgraduate students to conduct environmental and social impact assessments of planned projects.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Progress towards results in 2022 demonstrated that innovations and adjustments emerging from the MTR in 2021 remain valid for the remaining two years of the Country Programme. In 2023, therefore, UNICEF will continue to organize its programmatic initiatives according to the overarching themes identified in the MTR: PF4C, digitalization, gender, climate change, humanitarian-development-peace nexus and ECD. Given the shrinking donor space, UNICEF will continue to advocate for government financing and leadership for children and young people, and build domestic technical and institutional capacity.

Significant innovations in 2022 laid a strong foundation for strengthened systems and equitable service delivery by government, including digitalization across sectors and innovative climate-sensitive WASH pilots for subsequent handover and scaling up by government.

Strong coordination mechanisms and sustained engagement led to strategic direction-setting and strengthened systems

Despite continued political instability, progress made in strengthening systems, and achieving institutional and legal reform, demonstrated the value of strong coordination to create political space and commitment to children. Both Federal Iraq and KRI established multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms and entities for child protection and progressed legal reform. UNICEF will sustain engagement, advocacy and technical support to ensure mechanisms remain functional and legislations advanced in 2022 are adopted by parliament.

COVID-19 and capacity gaps had limited the effective implementation of GESPs developed in 2019, as directorates of education depended on civil society initiatives and top-down federal directives. With this lesson learned, for the new GESP cycle in 2022, UNICEF strengthened government-led education coordination mechanisms to allocate funds, strengthen education leadership and enhance accountability. UNICEF is also supporting directorates to improve planning and budgeting.

As digitalization progresses, government coordination will become ever more important for sustainability. UNICEF will support this by having government counterparts lead selection and design of digital solutions.

Bundled and integrated services, and cross-sectoral approaches, accelerated results for children and young people

Led and designed by MOH with UNICEF support, bundled outreach services provided lifesaving services and potential paths toward universal health coverage. Integrated vaccination services and SBC leveraged COVID-19 resources to reach over 134,000 zero-dose children with RI. Integrating cold chain and the broader supply chain contributed to infrastructure, operational budgeting, and equipment to benefit immunization systems in the long term.

Cross-sectoral collaborations created opportunities to advocate for strategic approaches to child-centred care and services. MHPSS services for children and adolescents were delivered through both schools and primary healthcare centres, with referral pathways for advanced support. Adolescents, especially girls, were empowered through gender-sensitive and inclusive teacher training on LSCE. With funding for ordnance risk education decreasing, UNICEF supported an innovative delivery modality, in which schoolteachers were trained to deliver awareness-raising messages to students, and youth groups to deliver messages to their peers. UNICEF work with vulnerable children affected by explosive remnants of war in Iraq was featured by the organization globally to advocate for the end of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, in support of an international declaration led by Ireland.

Cross-sectoral linkages contributed to 64,900 vulnerable children returning to learning, climate-resilient WASH in schools and healthcare facilities, with sustainable solar power in schools, and the finalization of the cross-sectoral ECD strategy. The mainstreaming of young people's engagement across all programmes was further expanded in 2022.

Innovative approaches, cost-sharing and leveraged partnerships expanded the reach of UNICEF interventions despite funding constraints

Blended WASH financing presented opportunities to address funding gaps. For instance, UNICEF implemented the sub-zoning programme in Basra with financial contributions from an energy company which significantly accelerated results for children in the water sector, while MoCHPM financed digital water meters in 15 Iraqi governorates, complementing UNICEF interventions. However, expanding this approach will require development of finance mechanisms and systematic identification of WASH business needs.

Cost-sharing with communities sensitized through SBM supported EMIS rollout. In SBM schools, communities provided laptops while UNICEF trained teachers to enter EMIS data. Passed-on learning also expanded the reach of UNICEF e-pedagogy capacity building by including more teachers in the same schools.

While 553 schools implemented SBM through school block grants from UNICEF, 351 "guest" schools sharing same premises and 427 additional schools developed learning improvement plans and exercised administrative and financial authorities through capacity building.

UNICEF explored service-based approaches to ECE provision (in homes, schools and communities) as alternatives to expensive facility-based services. Through investment cases and cost-benefit analyses

allied with demand generation, UNICEF successfully advocated for alternative models which sensitized communities to demand services.

Evidence, data generation and mainstreaming gender should be prioritized

Lack of reliable, up-to-date data constrained advocacy with donors and governments, reduced motivation to address challenges to children, and prevented robust assessments of progress. Evidence produced through small, well-designed studies created interest amongst government counterparts, pointing to an avenue towards evidence-based health sector policy development. However, periodic surveys remain the most reliable data generation method and a new MICS exercise is planned for 2023.

The success of UNICEF's data-driven SBC interventions was predicated on six research studies and course corrections informed by regular data collection. Data collected via online surveys, Talkwalker, KOBO and U-Report were recorded and analysed on various platforms, such as the rumour tracking dashboard and the behavioural tracker. These enabled UNICEF and partners to understand drivers of behaviour, devise targeted interventions and reach 86 per cent of Iraq's population with messages on sustainable behaviour change to protect oneself against COVID-19.

Lack of data on young people specifically posed persisting challenges to integrating their concerns in policy development. In 2022, UNICEF developed a policy brief on youth engagement in decision-making processes and will coordinate with UN and governmental partners on upstream work, with a particular emphasis on generating further national data on young people.

Adolescent girls face particular challenges in terms of protection, GBV and access to education and meaningful work. While steps were taken in 2022, e.g. through GBV training for healthworkers, issues such as child marriage require further attention. Investment in mainstreaming gender across programmes will be accelerated in 2023, including cross-sectoral integrated programming with development partners taking adolescent girls as a focus.