

Timor-Leste

Update on the context and situation of children

2022 was a year of stabilization for Timor-Leste, with one limited wave of COVID-19, no massive floods like in the previous year, and two rounds of a peaceful, democratic presidential election. This enabled the Government and the UN, including UNICEF, to refocus on the country's long-term development goals while still supporting recovery efforts after the shocks of the past few years.

Steady efforts to vaccinate the population against COVID-19 contributed to containing the pandemic in 2022. Since the start of the pandemic, Timor-Leste has cumulated 23,397 COVID-19 cases, with 138 deaths. As of 31 December 2022, 80% of the population age 12 and above had received two doses (79.3% of adults and 82.5% of adolescents between 12-17 years of age), and 34.9% of adults the booster dose.

The easing of the pandemic in Timor-Leste supported the economic recovery, initiated in 2021, that continued in 2022 with an estimated 3.3% non-oil real GDP growth (US\$1.858 GDP) fueled by public spending and increased household consumption. However, as a small island developing state, Timor-Leste was particularly vulnerable to the global rise of food and energy prices driven by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Consumer prices rose by 7% on average during the year, with the heaviest burden on the most vulnerable.

In response, the Government provided fuel subsidies for public transportation, agriculture, and fisheries; a food basket for the whole population; and a one-off payment of US\$200, in December 2022, to families earning less than US\$500 per month (the great majority of the population). A new Government cash transfer, co-funded by Australia and targeting pregnant women and young children, started being piloted in 3 of the 14 municipalities.

Elections for the President of the Republic were held in the first quarter of 2022, with two rounds of voting held peacefully to elect a leader among 16 candidates, including 4 women. There was strong voter turnout, with a participation rate of 77% for the first round (6 percentage points higher than for the previous presidential election). This confirms the country's growing maturity as a democracy.

However, the country's past continued to weigh heavily in politics: despite the large proportion of youth in the population, 87% of the population considered - as an important characteristic for a presidential candidate - the role of that person in Timor-Leste's independence movement (1975-1999), and only 62% trusted the younger generations of political leaders to lead the country (2022 Tatoli! Public Perception Survey, The Asia Foundation).

This was also illustrated through the State budget rectification in mid-2022, with the creation of a new US\$1 billion Veterans' Fund that significantly increased the State budget - to be funded from the Petroleum Fund, contributing to fast depletion of the Fund. This posed significant issues in terms of equity and was ultimately judged unconstitutional by the Court of Appeals, and subsequently withdrawn.

The election of Nobel Prize winner Jose Ramos Horta in March 2022 opened new opportunities for drawing attention to the unmet needs of children in Timor-Leste and building political commitment for action. The President has become an outspoken advocate for children, with his vision of "a Timor-Leste where no child dies at birth, and where every child is healthy, well-nourished, learning, and safe" and his two Presidential priorities to reduce child malnutrition and to provide access to pre-school education for every child. He has also drawn attention to poverty in general, and child poverty in particular. Following the President's leadership, the Government has worked toward translating his

priorities into action. This contributed to significant increases for nutrition and preschools in the State budget for 2023, and to the establishment of a Mission Unit to Combat Stunting under the Prime Minister.

Another significant development in 2022 was the national Census, which was carried out after two years of delay linked to the lack of a State budget in 2020 and to the emergencies that hit Timor in 2021. National data collection was completed, and preliminary findings were issued in late 2022. The total population is 1.34 million, most of whom live in rural areas, but urbanization has continued to grow, now at 37% compared with 30% in 2015. While the population growth rate has slowed down, at 1.8% it remains the highest in Southeast Asia. More comprehensive data from the census will be released in 2023, as the National Statistics Office pursues analysis. This will provide much-needed indication on progress and gaps, as the last large-scale national surveys date back to 2016 (DHS), 2015 (Census), and 2014 (Living Standards Survey).

Looking forward, concerns remain regarding the capacity of the country to continue to finance its development over time, as oil production has dwindled, the Petroleum Fund is gradually being depleted through large withdrawals to finance the State budget, and efforts to diversify the economy have not yet yielded significant results. A sharp fiscal cliff is predicted over the next decade, with dire consequences for the provision of basic social services, which are already underbudgeted compared to the regional and international standards. This prospect makes it even more urgent to adequately invest in the development of human capital.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Child Survival and Development

In 2022, significant progress was made in scaling up routine immunization as well as maternal, neonatal and child health (MNCH) services. The establishment of three Basic Emergency Obstetric and Newborn Care facilities and the strengthening of 37 Community Health Centers in six municipalities with MNCH equipment has gradually increased the number of deliveries at the health post and community health centers to 52% of total deliveries and decreased home deliveries from 3,035 (in 2021) to 2,657 (in 2022).

The Measles and Rubella (MR) second dose has reached above 80% of children in each municipality. Preparations have been underway, during the last quarter of the year, for an MR campaign, scheduled for the first quarter of 2023, to reach 95% of all children under five years age group coupled with the introduction of Pneumococcal conjugate vaccine for the first time.

The COVID-19 vaccination scaled up in 2022 targeting adolescents aged 12-17 years and a booster dose for adults. In total, 1,902,103 doses had been administered by 31st December 2022 reaching 88.9% of above 18 age group with the first dose, 79.3% with the second dose and 34.9% with a booster. For the adolescents aged 12–17 years, 96.3% received the first dose and 82.5% the second dose. This national level achievement of COVID-19 vaccination at 79.9% is one of the highest in East Asia and the Pacific, although still slightly below the national target of 90% due to low coverage in three municipalities. UNICEF supported the establishment of four regional warehouses with cold chain capacity to store routine antigen and Pfizer vaccine as well as the expansion of the national warehouse capacity to store at least one million doses of routine antigen and 700,000 Pfizer doses with backup generators.

UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health (MoH) to reach 4,146 children suffering from Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) with treatment at an 81% cure rate. In addition, 67,574 children 6-59 months old received Vitamin A, while 65,859 children 12-59 months old received deworming tablets. Furthermore, UNICEF supported the MoH to reach 33,816 children 6-23 months old with multiple

micro-nutrient powders (MNP) for home fortification to increase the micro-nutrient quality of complimentary food in all 13 municipalities and adolescents through iron-folate distribution. In collaboration with the MoH, UNICEF launched the National Health Sector Nutrition Strategic Plan 2022-2026, and the Timor-Leste Food and Nutrition Survey 2020.

UNICEF supported seven Community Health Centers (CHCs) with the provision of disability-accessible and gender-segregated toilets. Another 15 CHCs were provided with supplies for infection prevention and control, and for maintaining WASH facilities. Furthermore, water quality monitoring capacity of eight municipalities was strengthened with mini laboratories. Community Led Total Sanitation approach helped 161 additional communities reach Open Defecation Free (ODF) status in 3 municipalities, totaling 1,237 communities in 9 municipalities. Moreover, 17 permanent hand-washing stations with child and disability-accessible features were installed in key public places in the capital.

Learning

UNICEF continued its advocacy and support in strategic areas to improve the quality of education. In preparation for the Transforming Education Summit, convened by the UN Secretary General, 4 sub-national and one national consultation were held with comprehensive discussions around COVID-19 pandemic-related learning recovery, pivotal role of teachers, digital technologies/21st century skills, and strengthening public financing. Over 500 representatives including national/municipal officials, relevant ministries, civil society and disability organizations, students, teachers, and development partners participated in the discussions. The process culminated in a National Statement of Commitment, endorsed by the President of the Republic, to transform education in Timor-Leste.

As a result of joint advocacy and support from UNICEF, a significant milestone in the education sector was the government's official submission to the South-East Asian Ministers of Education Organization to join the 2024-round of the South-East Asia Primary Learning Metrics. This will be the first nationally representative learning assessment ever conducted in Timor-Leste and marks a critical moment in improving the learning policy.

UNICEF continued to support early learning through community-based preschools (CBPS), and the school readiness programme for children from 3 years to early primary grades - benefiting 2,858 preschool students and 2,128 grade 1 students. A country-led evaluation of the preschool education sub-sector was finalized, which will inform future preschool policies and programming in the country. UNICEF collaborated closely with the HANDS programme (a preschool programme funded by New Zealand) to finalize the preschool management decree law, which is crucial for sustainability of CBPS, and has been submitted to government for endorsement.

A study was completed in 2022 to determine the extent of learning loss due to COVID-19 related school closure. Based on the findings and the need to mitigate the impacts of the learning losses, UNICEF started the distribution of over 2 million children's stories and activity books to all preschools and basic education schools. Guidelines on how to use the books and a package of resources for teachers on strategies to address learning loss were produced, and school leaders were oriented on these resources.

Over 22 % of schools do not have access to toilets and those that have access to toilets often do not have access to water. To address this issue, UNICEF has been providing a 'small grant for WASH and provided guidelines for schools to find a community-led solution to access water. In 2022, 139 schools accessed the grant enabling them to access clean water for the prevention of COVID-19 and other diseases. In addition, group hand-washing stations were installed in 30 Basic Education Schools. To promote menstrual hygiene management, 120 girls and 22 female teachers attended the training on re-usable sanitary pads. To empower students and encourage them to participate in school activities and management, UNICEF supported training of student councils in 19 schools with participation by community leaders and parents.

Child Protection

UNICEF continued to support the strengthening of the child protection system at different levels. At the policy and enabling environment level, the development of the Law of ‘Protection of Children and Youth in Danger’ is nearing its last stages after detailed consultations at the community level and discussions at the Parliament and will be tabled for parliamentary approval in early 2023.

Furthermore, the Child and Family Welfare Policy was reviewed and cleared –by the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion (MSSI)– and submitted to the Council of Ministers for approval. The draft open regime decree law for children in detention has been presented to the Ministry of Justice for endorsement and is expected to be presented to the Council of Ministers for approval in early 2023.

At the level of service provision, UNICEF supported the development of guidelines and manual for Mental Health and Psycho-social Support (MHPSS) interventions, providing training to 40 staff of relevant stakeholders, and supporting MoH establish a data tracking system for the mental health hotline. UNICEF continued to provide support to 22 Child Friendly Spaces at the community level that benefited around 2,381 children, 61 community-based volunteers and 3,354 parents and caregivers. Furthermore, UNICEF supported the development of Standard Operating Procedures for birth registration as well as the analysis and assessment of needs to improve the data centre for civil registration at the Ministry of Justice. The government decree on the implementation of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics was finalized. Mobile birth registration campaigns were conducted in 7 municipalities that registered 39,480 children who received their birth certificates.

In terms of capacity-building of service providers, the capacity of 449 Social Welfare Workforce professionals was strengthened in three municipalities through a training programme focused on the eight-modules curriculum of social service workers. Eight MSSI core trainers attended accredited certification training for level four on training and assessment and completed the certified course based on international standards in November 2022. UNICEF continued to provide support to MSSI to review the existing parenting education modules, including development of three additional modules, as well as review of the implementation strategy, and delivery of training of trainers to 61 relevant stakeholders including local leaders. Through sectoral collaboration with the education sector, UNICEF provided orientation on *Eskola Ba Uma* and the Learning Passport to the managers of 41 residential care institutions and provided 28 tablets and 20 projectors.

Social Policy and Inclusion

Budget advocacy spearheaded by UNICEF was successful, with sizable increases in the 2023 State budget for nutrition and preschools. This included targeted trust-building with decision-makers and influencers; situation of children and required actions through storytelling; and promoting costed scalable solutions based on proven implementation. The findings and recommendations of the Situation Analysis of Children were disseminated, in collaboration with the General Directorate of Statistics of the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the child rights institution INDDICA, with outreach to line ministries, the media, the National Parliament, and the Youth Parliament. High-level advocacy with the newly elected President of the Republic, resulted in refining his vision for the country towards Early Childhood Development, with a focus on child malnutrition and education. A budget brief analyzing the proposed 2023 State budget from a child perspective was disseminated to the Parliamentarians and other stakeholders.

Further progress in entrenching the child marker, adopted in late 2021, in the public financial system, also contributed to the momentum towards attention to children’s needs in the State budget. The child marker was reflected in the development of the 2023 State budget, providing much-needed transparency on equity towards children. UNICEF’s support in this regard included advocacy,

training, technical support, and provision of IT equipment to the Ministry of Finance.

In social protection, UNICEF contributed towards two of the Government's cash transfer programmes by promoting the 'cash plus' initiatives focused on child malnutrition. UNICEF participated in the cash plus working group of the 'new generation Bolsa da Mae', funded by Timor-Leste and Australia, and targeting pregnant women and young children, which started in three municipalities. UNICEF also supported the Government's one-off payment of US\$200 to families by providing a calendar with nutrition messaging that was distributed with the cash to nearly 100,000 families in the 5 municipalities with the highest stunting rate. Support to the Government's Unique ID initiative continued, with technical assistance in the ministry in charge of social protection.

Data collection for the national Census was completed, after two years of delay, paving the way for fresh measurements of key indicators. UNICEF successfully advocated for an additional question on water availability and for further improving the questions on disabilities. UNICEF also provided technical assistance, in addition to 280 tablets for digital data collection.

Efforts to build national evaluation capacity continued, with the completion of the country-led evaluation on early childhood education, and the start of the country-led evaluation of the capacity building of social welfare workforce.

Youth empowerment and participation

UNICEF supported the Secretariat of State for Youth and Sports (SSYS) in strengthening civic participation of adolescents and youth, building capacity of the 96 subnational SSYS staff on various topics, and training 12 youth organizations on results-based management. UNICEF also undertook a nationwide mapping of youth groups to foster greater collaboration between Government, development partners and youth. Together with other UN agencies, UNICEF provided inputs to the long-awaited National Action Plan of the Youth Policy.

1,005 adolescents and youth (72% girls) led or took part in civic engagement initiatives with UNICEF support, including through student councils, girls' clubs, the Youth Parliament, and water conservation activities, or through dialogue or research, for the Transforming Education Summit, the development of a training module on the State budget, and youth-led research on internet use.

Children, young people and community members were directly engaged and empowered with support from UNICEF and provided opportunities and platforms to discuss or disseminate information on child rights using multiple channels. Advocacy with community radio stations helped 46 child reporters engage 99 children aged 8 to 18 years old to develop more than 50 children's radio programmes for peer-to-peer messaging on birth registration, the importance of COVID-19 prevention measures, health and nutrition, child labour, violence prevention, immunization and access to clean water.

UNICEF leveraged the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs and Social Communications to lead community engagement actions in 6 municipalities to raise awareness on child rights with 700 adolescents and youth.

People with Disabilities

UNICEF in partnership with the Organization of Persons with Disabilities (OPD) supported accessibility works (ramp, guiding blocks, accessible toilets) at the SSYS office, which had been used as the headquarters for youth mobilization after the 2021 floods. UNICEF and SSYS launched an operational guidance on the right to participation of adolescents and youth with disabilities, with practical tips based on consultations with relevant stakeholders. UNICEF supported capacity building of OPDs in the humanitarian context, with training offered to 20 staff on nutrition, access to education, LSBE, and violence prevention against people with disabilities.

A Child Functioning Screening tool, piloted in 2020, was updated, and a Teacher Training Package on Inclusive Education was developed. A Training of Trainers was conducted in the second quarter with 30 participants from the Ministry of Education and the National Teachers Training Institute.

To ensure that people with disabilities are not deprived of information, 200 posters were developed in braille for the Association of the Blind, and videos (on COVID-19 prevention and vaccine uptake, and infant and young child feeding) included sign language.

Gender

UNICEF Timor-Leste made progress in mainstreaming gender equality throughout its programmes with interventions to promote an enabling environment for girls within the education programming, continuing the establishment of menstrual hygiene groups, and support to 15 Community Health Centers with color coded bins to improve sanitary pad disposal. In parenting sessions, modules were designed and delivered with a strong gender lens.

Under the Spotlight Initiative programme, 136 girls, in two villages in the Emera municipality, benefitted from the psycho-social educational programme designed to prevent Gender-based violence. Engagement with 3,840 community members and community leaders in 190 locations in three municipalities provided a platform for youth and others to discuss the root causes of violence against women and girls and collective actions needed to prevent violence in intimate relationships and promote positive parenting.

Climate change

Greening activities were launched in 12 schools and 6,750 trees were distributed to 30 schools. This will benefit approximately 5,770 students.

UNICEF supported the National Authority for Water and Sanitation (ANAS) to monitor and map water catchments in Timor-Leste as a first step to implement the National Water Resources Management Policy. The exercise helped identify 1,367 locations with the potential of increased water retention, and the associated costing. UNICEF supported a climate resilient WASH project with the focus on mainstreaming community-based water catchment management. It helped construct 13 ponds, 39 artificial reservoirs, 30 earth dams and 33 terraces in 15 sub villages, immensely improving water retention and ground water recharge thus increasing the yield of water springs. A total of 261 community members participated in constructing these structures. Moreover, 357 school children were oriented on the importance of water catchment management.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

During 2022, UNICEF Timor-Leste further deepened its partnerships with the Government, other UN agencies, development partners, and Civil Society Organizations.

With the Government, UNICEF signed rolling work plans with various ministries: Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Works, Ministry of Justice, National Parliament, General Prosecutor's Office, Ministry of Finance, Prime Minister's Office, National Institute for Child Rights, Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs and Social Communications and Secretary of State for Youth and Sports.

Within the UN System:

- UNICEF partnered with WHO to provide support to the Government’s response to COVID-19, including the integration of COVID-19 vaccination into routine immunization and the preparation of the introduction of the Pneumococcal conjugated vaccine.
- As an implementing agency of the Spotlight Initiative to end violence against women and girls, UNICEF, together with UN Women, UNFPA, UNDP and ILO, continued to contribute to four of the six pillars of the joint programme.
- Partnering with ILO and WFP, UNICEF negotiated with the European Union a new joint programme on nutrition-sensitive social protection.
- Funded by USAID (Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance), a new joint programme with IOM in support of child protection in emergencies was approved.
- UNICEF also continued to strengthen joint communications within the UN system as Chair of the UN Communications Group as well as Chair of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework Results Group on Education, and Co-Chair of the Results Group on Nutrition and Food Security.
- In the area of Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (PSEA), UNICEF joined forces with other UN agencies to train partners and relevant staff in the new UN common PSEA assessment tool.
- In support of the 2023 National Census, UNICEF contributed together with UNFPA, UN WOMEN and UNDP to the successful completion of this important data collection exercise.
- UNICEF and ILO launched the results of a joint survey on the key drivers of child labor and conducted advocacy for the approval of Timor-Leste’s National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labor.
- UNESCO and UNICEF organized four sub-regional and one national consultation on the Transforming Education Summit
- UNICEF partnered with the World Bank on technical collaboration, promoting sector coordination, and high-level advocacy, in a number of areas including data and evaluations, Government spending (PFM), poverty, sector reviews, community-based initiatives, and maternal and child malnutrition.

UNICEF partnered with Civil Society Organizations including academic institutions, national NGOs, youth-led organizations and international NGOs and continued advocacy with development partners to drive support, visibility and funding for child rights. This included broadening the partnership base by adding new donors such as the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance and the French UNICEF National Committee. UNICEF also engaged with development partners to highlight the most critical issues of children, including advocacy for increased and more effective coordination to children nutrition, as well as on increased state budget allocations for nutrition and early education.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

The operational guidance on the right to participation of adolescents and youth with disabilities constitutes an innovation. Many documents expose the barriers that persons with disabilities face in Timor-Leste and dispense broad, theoretical advice toward inclusion. However past experiences have shown that in practice, those who want to include persons with disabilities in their activities struggle to do so successfully. The operational guidance developed in 2022 focused on “how” to include persons with disabilities in-everyday activities, workshops, consultations, etc. It is a fit-for-context,

practical guide, based on requests and solutions from adolescents and youth with disabilities, their parents, OPDs and local leaders. The document, finalized in collaboration with disability focal points from various line ministries and OPDs, was launched but will need further dissemination in 2023.

Another innovation was the application of adaptive management principles to the adolescent civic participation programme. A Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) plan was developed early on, deepening the results framework by identifying specific signals that can provide an early sense of whether expected results are on track or constrained. This led, for instance, to monitoring oral interventions made by females and males during various trainings, to promote equal participation, and to creating a unique, nominal list of all programme beneficiaries to ensure continuity and impact among the various activities.

An innovation in UNICEF's advocacy approach was the use of storytelling i.e. sharing data on the situation of children and gaining support for concrete actions by policy makers through a narrative focusing on the impact of actions on the life of a Timorese child, Maria. The story of Maria has become a symbol of the life of a child from the eyes of a child, starting with the current situation baked with facts and data from the SitAn (releasing Cortisol in the brain – associated with distress, focus and attention), followed by how the situation could be different (releasing Oxytocin in the brain – associated with empathy, care and connection), and ending the story with concrete actions to have a different, improved life of Maria. This approach worked very well in advocating for increased resources for nutrition and preschools.

While significant headways were made with regards to increasing allocation for children in the State budget, the budget advocacy carried out in 2022 also brought some important lessons to be applied in future years. While it is crucial to act upon opportunities, it is equally important to plan ahead, review what evidence and costing is available and what needs to be developed in advance, assign clear responsibilities within the Country Office, and regularly review progress and adjust the plan. Similarly, the complexity of the stakeholder landscape, with several other development partners carrying out budget advocacy and with a multiplicity of partner-funded advisers embedded in ministries, calls for a well-thought-out strategy to be implemented over the longer term to ensure alignment of messages as well as coordinated approaches. In this regard, working closer with UN agencies may provide some opportunities.

UNICEF continued to support the MoH in the establishment, reactivation, and training of Mother Support Group (MSG) members to serve as community change agents by promoting key care practices for children and pregnant and lactating mothers at the community level. The establishment and training of community groups were made possible through cooperation with local NGOs, who supported regular meetings with the MSG to plan activities and resolve problems.