

## Tajikistan

### Update on the context and situation of children

Tajikistan has seen positive trends in the poverty rate, which decreased from 29.5 per cent in 2017 to 21.2 per cent in 2023. In his address to Parliament in December 2023, The President of Tajikistan emphasized the Government's commitment to reducing the poverty level to 10 per cent in the next seven years. Other top government priorities include establishing a green economy, accelerating the economy's digitization, developing human resources, raising the competitiveness of homegrown goods, bolstering export prospects, and enhancing the standard of social services. The government also introduced a new "Healthy Nation" project, which aims to further increase the quality and efficiency of primary health care services and strengthen the national capacity to respond to emergency situations in the field of health.

Tajikistan is within the top 25 per cent of the fastest growing populations globally. Tajikistan is also a very young population with one out of three Tajiks under 15 years old; children under six years old comprise 17 per cent of the population. This demographic context presents a unique opportunity for Tajikistan to invest in its young people as a means of strengthening its growth and development potential (World Bank, 2021).

This investment begins with a healthy childhood. The government has committed to construct and rehabilitate over 350 health care facilities in the next five years. Nonetheless, key health system challenges include the availability of critical commodities in maternity and neonatal departments, compliance with protocols and standards, infection prevention and control (IPC), awareness among parents of adequate new-born care, disease prevention, and early recognition of childhood illnesses. Vaccine coverage remains consistently high in Tajikistan, reaching 520,000 children annually. However, recent polio and measles outbreaks highlight the need to strengthen primary health care services, including disease surveillance and addressing zero-dose/under-vaccinated children.

Iodine deficiency and related disorders remain prevalent, as only 13 per cent of salt is adequately iodized, with challenges in enforcing the mandatory salt iodization legislation, quality control/quality assurance and access to KIO<sub>3</sub>. Furthermore, inadequate diets and rampant infections are leading to stunting and wasting. While mothers generally breastfeed, only half of all infants are introduced to complementary foods at appropriate ages, and only nine per cent of children aged 6-23 months receive optimal infant and young child feeding (IYCF) (DHS, 2017).

Meanwhile, the government has committed to increase WASH financing by twofold, which is evident from the fund allocation to the State Programme on Drinking Water and Sanitation. This was achieved in part through UNICEF's technical support on identifying and drafting commitments for the UN Water Conference. Additionally, targets have been set and key indicators on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6.1 and 6.2 are incorporated in the National Water Strategy and the State Programme. Nonetheless, 1 in 4 households lack access to sufficient water. According to the Joint Monitoring Programme on WASH, the use of contaminated water is 2 per cent in urban areas and 16 per cent in rural areas.

The number of children enrolled in primary and lower-secondary schools increased from 2.1 million students in 2017 to 2.6 million students in 2023 – with a government aim to reach 2.7 million students by 2027. However, many children, particularly girls, children with disabilities and those in rural communities lack opportunities for inclusive quality basic education. A recent UNICEF study found that only 16 per cent of schools are connected to the internet. Pre-primary education Tajikistan lags behind other Central Asian countries, with enrolment rates stagnated at 15 per cent (MoES EMIS,

2021). In 2020/21, only 30.6 per cent of children with disabilities were enrolled in education, with one third of them in residential care institutions. One in three girls do not continue their education beyond 9th grade (VRA, 2018) and only 35 per cent of higher education students are female (National Strategy for Education Development 2021-2030).

To address youth empowerment issues, the government adopted and began implementing its Youth Strategy 2030, with UNICEF support. Despite the normative ground being framed however, the narrative of youth participation remains challenging, where only 15 per cent of young people are participating in the life of their community, only 12 per cent participate in their local government decision-making and only 6 per cent speak during a meeting (UNICEF, 2018). In addition, in a UNICEF supported study using 2022 administrative data, the Committee of Youth and Sports found that 27 per cent of young people aged 14-30 were not in employment, education or training.

Meanwhile, the government continues to make progress in the process of deinstitutionalization of children – the number of children in residential care decreased by 18 per cent (from 8,099 in 2020 to 6,616 in 2022). However, contrary to the overall trend, the number of children with disabilities in institutions increased by 15 per cent (from 1,937 children in 2020 to 2,232 in 2022). Furthermore, children left behind by migrating parents continue to face many challenges in accessing basic health, education services, civil registry, and social protection.

During the past seven years, 2 billion 70 million somoni were allocated to social assistance for poor families and disabled children, as well as one-time compensation to citizens affected by disasters. In July 2023, the government's Targeted Social Assistance programme introduced an automatic indexation mechanism which minimized inclusion and exclusion errors and calculates the value of funds transferred based on number of children per household instead of a fixed household benefit. Furthermore, in 2022 all 32,382 newly registered children with disabilities (15,220 girls) received social benefits, compared to only 84 per cent in 2015.

In 2023, 48 natural disasters caused 51 casualties and over US\$7 million in economic damage in Tajikistan. Major emergencies included avalanches in GBAO (February 2023), a 5.8M earthquake in Kuhistoni Matchoh and Rasth districts (March 2023) and series of floods, landslides, mudflows across the country (August 2023). The situation on both the Kyrgyz-Tajik border and the Tajik-Afghan border remained stable, with no new cross-border tensions and land crossing registered in 2023. The Kyrgyz-Tajik border delimitation and demarcation deal is expected to be signed in early 2024.

## Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF's new Country Programme from 2023-2026 aligns with many of these challenges, with a specific focus on ensuring children and young people, especially the most vulnerable and excluded, are born and grow up in a healthy and protective environment, can develop to their full potential and realize their rights. The Country Programme builds on previous successes and is aligned with the Government's National Development Strategy 2030 and Mid-term Development Programme 2021-2025, as well as government sectoral policies and strategies. The Country Programme also contributes to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and supports the achievement of the SDGs.

### **Surviving and thriving**

#### *Improving the enabling environment*

UNICEF's technical leadership for the national conceptualization of early childhood development helped facilitate the implementation of the Nurturing Care Framework and the creation of the child

health and development record book. The record book was developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population (MoHSPP) and the World Bank; it includes all components of the Nurturing Care Framework and ensures improved developmental monitoring of children 0-6 years old. In addition, the latest UNICEF and WHO training modules on essential, small, and sick newborn care were incorporated into the undergraduate curricula of the Republican Medical College.

UNICEF's advocacy and technical support contributed to the development of the National Water Strategy, the finalisation of the National State Programme on Drinking Water and Sanitation, the National WASH Standards for Health Care Facilities and Schools, and the first National Roadmap on Hand Hygiene. UNICEF also successfully advocated for increased allocation to the water sector (doubled from 0.67 per cent of GDP in 2022). An investment case on WASH in health care facilities was developed with UNICEF's support and endorsed by MoHSPP.

Meanwhile, in partnership with MoHSPP and the Ministry of Finance, UNICEF initiated studies to strengthen public finance for nutrition. Preliminary findings suggest a lack of strong public finance management mechanisms, inability to account for nutrition-related expenditures, and lack of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the National Nutrition Action Plan. Additionally, MoHSPP and UNICEF jointly published the national iodine status survey results, which found deteriorating coverage of adequately iodized salt (32 per cent in 2019 vs 13 per cent in 2021) and inadequate iodine status (48.1 microgram/l) among children between 6-59 months old. Stakeholders agreed on five priority action areas, including stronger political commitment, improved partnership and coalitions, availability of adequately iodized salt, strengthened monitoring system and surveillance, and continuous education and communication.

### ***Improving national and subnational health, nutrition and WASH services***

With funding from the European Union and in collaboration with WHO and GIZ, the capacity of 5,430 primary health care workers and 2,107 hospital staff in 40 districts and cities (out of 68) was strengthened on essential aspects of IPC. IPC measures and practices were improved through provision of essential medical equipment and WASH facilities to 750 primary health facilities and 31 secondary health facilities in 37 districts. Two oxygen systems are functioning (with 15 to be installed in 2024), strengthening the quality of maternal, newborn and child health service in the country.

UNICEF's support to MoHSPP and the Republican Family Medicine Center helped provide in-service capacity building and supportive supervision for 1,745 family doctors and nurses in 30 districts, improving services for 864,909 children. UNICEF's capacity building also enabled 10 Comprehensive Family and Child Support Units to provide early childhood intervention services to 500 children with developmental delays and disabilities.

Meanwhile, UNICEF's support to the Republican Centre for Immuno-Prophylaxis strengthened supportive supervision visits to 1,357 immunization points. The immunization coverage in 2023 for MCV1 and DTP3 was 97.6 per cent and 96.4 per cent respectively. While UNICEF and WHO's support to the national Measles-Rubella vaccination campaign helped the government reach 98 per cent of children aged 6 months to 15 years old.

UNICEF's technical and supply assistance helped MoHSPP reach 1,125,876 children (96.7 per cent nationwide) with the first semester vitamin A supplementation. Coverage of IYCF counselling increased to 835 health facilities in 2023 compared to 213 health facilities in 2022. As a result, an additional 1,895 health care workers improved their knowledge and skills in providing quality IYCF counselling.

Digital solutions, namely the e-HR registry and e-perinatal referral system, were introduced with

potential to scale-up nationwide. UNICEF’s technical and supply assistance to pilot the e-perinatal referral registry for 356 health workers led to timely birth planning for 2,725 pregnant women and referral of 173 pregnant women with severe delivery complications.

### ***Boosting demand for quality services***

With UNICEF technical support, MoHSPP developed 16 communication materials used in 294 health care facilities in seven districts. The revised Maternal Child Health (MCH) Handbook was completed and recommended nationally for improving behaviour and maternal and childcare practices. To support parents in child upbringing, 56 community self-help groups were established in seven districts, supporting 611 parents/caregivers.

Positive parenting was promoted through UNICEF’s mobile parenting app “Bebbo”, which helps facilitate engagement of parents/caregivers with their children, monitors child development, and promotes key child and adolescent care practices and positive behaviours. Meanwhile, UNICEF’s support to MoHSPP with their pilot launch of Tabassum (a behaviour change digital platform) helped disseminate relevant content on emotional resilience for adolescents, parents and teachers, and helped connect those in need to psychological counselling.

### **Learning and skills**

#### ***Improving the enabling environment***

UNICEF supported the Mid-Term Education Action Plan 2024-2026; the revision and adoption of the National Digital Roadmap of Education Digital and State Programme for the Introduction of ICT in Schools during 2024-2028; the National Roadmap on Competency-Based Education Reform; and development of the National Concept in Inclusive Education, which is aligned with the International Legal Framework on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

With support from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and UNICEF, MoES’ capacity in coordination, planning, and financing was strengthened through a newly established coordination/analytical unit within MoES. UNICEF support to MoES also contributed to the National Strategic Action Plan on Climate Adaptive WASH in Schools. Meanwhile, extensive consultation was held with MoES and partners on introducing universal pre-primary education to improve school readiness.

#### ***Competency-based learning and market-aligned skills***

In partnership with MoES, Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), GPE and UNICEF, the learning progression model for developing textbook chapters in grade 5 mathematics and Tajik language were adapted and included in teaching and learning materials being used in 30 pilot schools, by 60 mentors, 160 teachers and 3,000 grade 5 children. UNICEF also launched an inclusive pre-primary school project with USAID, which will scale up the alternative model of school-based pre-primary education to boost ECE coverage by 15 per cent.

Through UNICEF support, an online information management system for Centres for Additional Education (CAE) was developed and tested for enhancing the quality of reporting by CAE. A digital ‘e-library’ <https://marifat.tj> of education materials was developed with MoES and UNICEF, providing teachers and students easy access to education resources, textbooks, documents, and multi-media content like audio and video lessons. UNICEF also supported the deployment of an online/offline digital platform to facilitate conferencing among MoES departments.

Meanwhile, 43,000 adolescents (49 per cent girls) in 47 districts gained transferable and basic digital

skills, including refugees and adolescents in remote rural areas. UNICEF also initiated the handover process of the Adolescent Innovation Lab to MoES, as per the sustainability and self-financing strategy. Through Impact Sourcing Hubs for remote jobs for youth employability, 5,005 young people were capacitated, out of which 1,000 (70 per cent females) secured employment.

Young people's participation was advanced through civically engaging 17,500 young people in effective policy and advocacy formulation, and participation in climate change discussions. Girls' leadership skills were promoted, and their voices amplified through meaningful participation. In response to girls raising menstrual health hygiene as hindering their learning and school attendance, UNICEF developed a training package which became the first ever approved course on menstrual health hygiene by MoES with technical support from MoHSP.

UNICEF further advanced youth participation through expanding the Youth Friendly Local Governance programme to seven additional districts (total 17 districts). The uniqueness and added value came from integrating Afghan refugees with local young people in civic engagement, thus strengthening integration and promoting social cohesion.

UNICEF also provided a national platform for meaningfully consultation with young people, including the inclusion of young people's recommendations in the Voluntary National Report of Tajikistan and Alternative Human Rights Report prepared by civil society organizations (CSO) on child rights. During World Children's Day, young people discussed issues pertaining to them with line ministries and presented their recommendations to the Deputy Prime Minister, major development partners and private companies.

### ***Boosting demand for quality and inclusive learning, skills development and youth participation***

With European Union funding, UNICEF contributed to evidence generation on digital transformation through a countrywide school internet connectivity study among 3,967 schools. The study found that only 16 per cent of schools are connected to the internet.

UNICEF also contributed to the first global Youth Development Plan and Agenda, including a European Union funded virtual reality product "Walking the Water Experience in Tajikistan," which was showcased at the UN Water Conference in New York.

## **Child protection**

### ***Improving the enabling environment***

UNICEF's advocacy contributed to legislative amendments introducing the universal ban on corporal punishment, establishing an enabling environment for child's views in court proceedings, and providing rights for children to appeal to state institutions with no age limitations.

Another significant shift supported through UNICEF's advocacy was the government's policy regarding children repatriated from conflict zones. All 261 (124 girls, 137 boys) repatriated children are now reintegrated into their communities, demonstrating a true commitment of the Government towards applying the principle of 'the best interest of the child' in the reintegration of repatriated children. The State Programme on Rehabilitation, Reintegration, Employment and Education for Women and Children Repatriated from the War Zones and its corresponding action plan were adopted in September 2023.

Meanwhile, UNICEF provided technical inputs for the draft Law on Civil Registration, advocating for universal free birth registration for all children and supported the establishment of a multi-agency working group on birth registration under the Ministry of Justice (MoJ).

UNICEF's long-standing advocacy and technical support also contributed to the approval of a new Juvenile Justice System Reform Programme 2023-2027. The programme prioritizes the introduction of diversion mechanisms, focusing on moving children away from the formal justice system.

### ***Strengthening of the social service workforce***

UNICEF support to MoHSPP helped initiate a comprehensive mapping of the social service workforce for child protection and established a dedicated working group to oversee the revision and institutionalization of case management tools and the corresponding regulatory framework. This is the first step in supporting the government in improving the availability of a qualified social service workforce for child protection as well as child protection case management and referral systems, which are critical in ensuring a continuum of protective and responsive child protection services.

UNICEF also strengthened its partnership with the National Commission on Child Rights on several key child protection areas, such as evidence generation on alternative care, reintegration of repatriated children, and facilitation of the first National Forum of Child Rights Commissions. The establishment of the Child Rights Centre under the Academy of Public Administration created access to more than 4,500 students to gain knowledge on child rights and child protection.

### ***Supporting vulnerable children, adolescents and caregivers to identify child rights violations and available services.***

Tajikistan became one of the first countries globally to pilot a diagnostic tool developed by UNICEF to assess the capacity of the statistical systems to collect, collate, analyse and disseminate administrative data on children living in alternative care. In addition, the regional multi-country evaluation of the national childcare reform initiatives provided concrete recommendations to further advance deinstitutionalization reforms. The evidence produced will support decisions of the new working group established under the President Administration to spearhead childcare reform and ultimately to reduce the number of children living in institutional care; and, whenever possible, to prevent institutionalization in the first place, or to reunite children with their families.

The school-based violence against children (VAC) reporting mechanism supported through the European Union funded Spotlight Initiative was expanded from 61 schools in 2022 to 347 schools in 2023. A series of training sessions on VAC improved the knowledge of 389 (148 female) school directors and representatives of local education departments, as well as 15,750 children (8,103 girls, 7,647 boys). To institutionalize the mechanism, the MoES endorsed a regulation instructing local education departments to roll out the mechanism in all schools across the country.

Furthermore, the first ever “parenting without violence” event was organized for MoJ employees, creating opportunities to discuss VAC issues (which are sensitive in Tajikistan) with government officials.

## **Governance and inclusion**

### ***Shock-responsive social protection systems***

UNICEF's technical and capacity support, consultations, advocacy, and coordination efforts supported the MoHSPP in shaping a Plan of Action for 2024-2026 to operationalize the National Social Protection Strategy. UNICEF also reinforced social protection coordination efforts and initiated an assessment of the social protection system using the Core-Diagnostic Instrument (CODI), which will help analyse the overall performance of the social protection system against national social protection objectives and international best practice benchmarks.

To enhance readiness for disaster response, UNICEF collaborated with MoHSPP, Committee of Emergency Situations and Civil Defence (CoES), and the Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan (RCST) to design a model for humanitarian cash transfers. UNICEF also collaborated with partners to conduct a five-day Core Cash and Voucher Assistance Skills Training to strengthen the capacity of government officials and partners to scale up cash transfer programmes during emergencies.

### ***Public finance for children***

UNICEF advanced its collaboration with the Ministry of Finance and engaged in policy dialogue with the Government on strategic planning, monitoring and reporting of the government's policy and reform. UNICEF's technical support helped strengthen gender-responsive and climate-responsive budgeting, aligning the state budget with the SDGs, and expanded transparency framework and citizen's budget with social sector spending, focusing on child related expenditures.

The agreement signed between World Bank and UNICEF created a space for UNICEF to be member of the National Poverty Council and to present the child poverty dimension in the country and the region. Data on child poverty framed discussions on the complex approach to reduce poverty and inequality through inclusive social protection, investment in human capital, and sustainable economic growth.

In partnership with the World Bank, UNICEF actively contributed to the poverty agenda, advocating for the inclusion of child poverty measurements in the revised monetary poverty methodology and incorporating child well-being questions in the Listening to Tajikistan baseline and high frequency surveys.

### ***Child rights monitoring system***

UNICEF advocated for better child rights monitoring and national evaluation systems, focusing on gathering evidence on children, especially related to SDG indicators, and incorporating it into the Voluntary National Review (VNR) to the High-Level Political Forum. Regional consultations and a dedicated VNR event further provided platforms for children and young people to express views on child rights and climate change. In partnership with Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, UNICEF contributed content for the SDG Summit in September 2023, reinforcing its commitment to advocacy, awareness initiatives and SDGs and highlighting Tajikistan's achievements in child-related SDGs.

In partnership with the Statistics Agency 'Tajstat', UNICEF completed a landscape analysis of the child-related data ecosystem, identifying priority actions for resource mobilization and improving data for children. The analysis revealed strengths, gaps, and opportunities, emphasizing the need for systematic dissemination and use of administrative data on children. UNICEF's support to Tajstat's data improvement efforts also ensured harmonized methodologies in the Demographic Health Survey.

### **Programme Effectiveness**

UNICEF worked towards efficient and quality multi-sectoral programming that is resilient to disasters and climate change. Close engagement between programme staff and field coordinators ensured effective monitoring and quality assurance, fostered an integrated and holistic approach to field activities, and strengthen advocacy for children's rights among partners and local authorities.

To advance equitable results for children, 4 million people were reached through social media and strategic communications, while social behaviour change interventions promoted positive changes in social norms on equity and gender equality among 1 million households and generated demand for

services among the most vulnerable.

Meanwhile, through partnership CoES, guidelines water safety for children in emergencies were developed and 2,300 children and 4,500 young people in rural areas improved their awareness on emergency preparedness through an awareness raising campaign. In response to avalanches in GBAO, a 5.8M earthquake in Kuhistoni Matchoh and Rasth districts and a series of floods, landslides and mudflows across the country, UNICEF, in partnership with RCST and CoES, provided immediate lifesaving assistance within 24 hours of the emergencies, in line with UNICEF's Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action. Preparedness actions and distribution of prepositioned WASH-related emergency supplies helped met the immediate needs of 8,865 affected/displaced people, including 5,253 children.

In 2023, a big shift was made in terms of working in the climate change area. Several activities were initiated, including the Climate Landscape Analysis for Children as well as the Children's Climate Risk Index – Disaster Risk Model. UNICEF's investments in these key evidence generation exercises are expected to improve the Government's understanding and management of risks and enable them to translate the recommendations into concrete actions that can be taken forward.

## **Operational Effectiveness**

Timely recruitment and smooth staff onboarding to fill critical posts for the new Country Programme was completed, equipping the office with the talent needed to achieve results for children.

As evidenced by the positive results of an internal audit and a European Union verification mission, UNICEF has a sophisticated mechanism in place for safeguarding of resources. UNICEF strengthened internal capacities and systems of government and non-government partners, with a particular focus on the use of the Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfers.

Furthermore, efficiencies were realized as the country office implemented new procedures and processes in line with UNICEF global and regional expectations. Effective collaboration and coordination with other UN agencies continued to foster synergies and efficiencies in delivering as "One UN" on many fronts, including through the business operations strategy and common premises.

## **UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships**

### ***UN collaboration***

UNICEF contributed to all four United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework results groups, serving as rotational chair for Results Group 1, Inclusive Human Development. UNICEF also played a key role in implementing the Country Business Operations Strategy.

Through the European Union funded Spotlight Initiative, UN collaboration between UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UNICEF supported women and girl survivors of violence through developing a national referral mechanism and improving mental health support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. In addition, the Multi-Partner Trust Fund project "Empowerment of families left behind for better migration outcomes," together FAO, IOM, UN WOMEN, and UNICEF improved the well-being of women and children, increased economic resilience, protected rights and supported the development and implementation of evidence-based national policies to address vulnerabilities of families left behind.

Meanwhile, partnership with UNDRR, the Government and UNICEF helped ensure that the design and implementation of early warning systems are child-sensitive. Partnership with UNDP led to



improvements in civil/birth registration and rule of law/justice for children; collaboration with IOM led to complimentary activities on WASH in primary health care facilities; and coordination with UNHCR led to streamlining child protection in emergencies. UNICEF also works in close collaboration with WHO in all aspects of our health programme. Meanwhile, advocacy and awareness initiatives were amplified through joint UN campaigns, such as UN Week, 16 Days of Activism, and the SDG Summit.

Furthermore, close collaboration with UNICEF Uzbekistan facilitated youth participation in the Samarkand Eco-Camp and Tashkent forum on Children and Youth in Action – Climate Change in Central Asia. This led to the inclusion of young people’s recommendations in the Regional Strategy on Promoting Sustainable Development Culture and Engaging Children and Youth in Climate Change Agenda, which was signed by five Central Asian states, including Tajikistan.

### ***Collaboration with development partners***

UNICEF chairs and co-chairs several Development Coordination Council groups, including social protection and education, and actively participates in the National Development Council to advance implementation of the National Development Strategy 2030 and the SDGs in Tajikistan.

The European Union remains a critical partner for children in Tajikistan, reducing the spread of infections across the health care delivery system, enhancing continuous access to quality education and employability of youth, protecting children affected by migration, and responding to protection, humanitarian, and reintegration needs of women, children and their families who have returned from conflict zones.

UNICEF also strengthened collaboration with USAID, launching a new inclusive pre-primary education project to scale up an alternative model of school based pre-primary education which will boost ECE coverage by 15 per cent over the next five years. Partnership with USAID also improved childhood nutrition and reduced the prevalence of iodine deficiency disorders through salt iodization. In addition, a new partnership with the US Department of State is enhancing social reintegration of children returned from conflict zones.

Continued partnership with CoES, USAID-BHA, IFRC, Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan, and REACT further enhance child centred disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, and helped protect the rights the most vulnerable children and their families during humanitarian situations.

Meanwhile, collaboration with JICA led to improvements in WASH in health care facilities and funded two young professionals to represent youth voices at the UN Water Conference in New York (with a third young professional funded by UNICEF). Renewed partnership with the Swiss Development Cooperation is promoting justice for children, specifically to introduce diversion mechanisms for children in conflict with the law. Furthermore, partnership with GPE and IsDB helped improve the competency-based curricular reform and equipped 58 schools with ICT equipment, furniture, and lab items, giving space to more than 15,000 children in rural areas to access learning and skills development opportunities. IsDB is also improving maternal, neonatal and child health services in the four districts of the Khatlon Region.

UNICEF strengthened its partnership with the World Bank, including early childhood development, poverty measurement, child poverty analysis, joint evidence generation through a Social Protection System Assessment, programmatic considerations related to Targeted Social Assistance, and work focused on shock-responsive and adaptive social protection. UNICEF also initiated engagement with IMF on their initiative to promote pro-poor growth, mainly through the World Bank-supported Targeted Social Safety Nets, and enhanced state budget transparency.

Continued partnership with Asia Development Bank (ADB) led to improved integrated delivery of

high-quality maternal and childcare services, as well as improved health seeking behaviours among pregnant women, mothers and caregivers. In addition, a new partnership was established with ADB, the Dushanbe City Administration and the state water and sanitation operator in Dushanbe city, DushanbeVodoKanal (DVK) to improve water and sanitation across the city and develop a City-Wide Water Safety Plan in line with the National Water Safety Strategy.

Partnerships were also strengthened with CSO on community mobilization and engagement in promoting child rights, comprehensive maternal and child health, breastfeeding, IYCF, immunization, early stimulation, responsive caregiving and parental mental health support. Meanwhile, partnership with the Early Years Network (consisting of 40 local CSOs), Aga Khan Foundation, the USAID Healthy Mother Healthy Baby Project led by Abt Association, and private partner Tcell contributed to the successful launch of the Bebbo parenting app.

### ***Private partnerships***

To promote public-private partnership, key discussions were initiated with Tcell and Eshkhat Bank to support programmatic areas in maternal and neo-natal health and adolescent skills development, including promoting digital and financial skills among young people.

Private funding from the Abdulla Family Foundation also helped improve sustainable and equitable access to safe drinking water, improved sanitation and improve hygiene practices in six primary health care facilities.

Furthermore, cooperation with Boston Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School provided expert support in conducting training on mental health and psychosocial services (MHPSS) to support children and their caregivers who have returned from conflict zones. Effective collaboration with Tajik National University's Psychology Department also resulted in the facilitation of a specialized five-day course on MHPSS.

Finally, a new partnership with the National Puppet Theatre helped raise awareness among young children and their caregivers on child rights, prevention of violence against children and disability inclusion.

## **Lessons Learned and Innovations**

### **Lesson learned: School connectivity**

One major lesson learned for UNICEF Tajikistan has been around digital transformation in education. The learning has been that a much more multi-faceted strategy and action plan and coordinated investments by key development partners are needed to achieve equitable outcomes for children through digital education.

UNICEF Tajikistan completed the Study on School Connectivity, funded by the European Union, which revealed that merely 16 per cent of all schools in Tajikistan have internet connectivity. This information is a critical baseline data, which is already used by the MoES. UNICEF had anticipated that in order to enhance digital transformation in education, high-quality digital ecosystem (electricity, connectivity, devices, pedagogical content, and ICT skills) is key.

At the same time, during our project implementation, we had learned the complexity of the legislations, sensitivities relating to public-private partnerships, and sensitivities relating to accessibility to data. In order for us to tackle these multi-faceted issues, closer and more strategic engagement with stakeholders much broader than the MoES, including National Committee on

Telecommunication, telecom providers, MoHSPP, and others are needed. Needless to say, stakeholders such as the international financial institutions, who can support the financing are critical players who UNICEF plans to partner with.

### **Lesson Learned: Executive level engagement during the UN Water Conference**

Another lesson learned was the reaffirmation that supporting the Government at the executive level on select key priority agenda paves way for concrete and tangible system changes results. In 2023, UNICEF Tajikistan supported the government with the drafting of the commitments for the UN Water Conference, which were presented by the President of Tajikistan at the COP 28. Specifically, UNICEF worked with other key partners in the DCC to propose two commitments, including increased finance and increased coverage of safely managed services, which were ultimately included in the final set of commitments. In addition, the close support provided to the government led to better positioning UNICEF on the water agenda. The President's interest and prioritization of the Water Agenda led to stronger political will, which subsequently triggered the initiation of a national water strategy (policy) – a big step, considering it was not in place for the last eight years. A new state programme on drinking water and sanitation was also initiated. The criticality of engaging on child rights issues and priorities at the executive level (Office of the Presidency and Deputy Prime Minister) was a key lesson learned.

### **Innovation: Digital solution in health sector (e-HR registry and e-perinatal referral system)**

UNICEF Tajikistan's support to the government was instrumental in developing and implementing the electronic human resource (e-HR) registry in the health care facilities/systems in three districts in Tajikistan. The project, funded by the ADB, has been highly appreciated by MoHSPP with recommendation for national scale up. This system is an inventory and data collection tool for the planning and management of health human resources for distribution of health care workforce across country to ensure equal access to quality medical services and decrease the high turnover and is important for continuous medical education planning to maintain adequate medical qualification of existing healthcare workers. This tool is critical in enabling better financial planning and training of new and existing health workers.

Another innovative solution within the MCH project is the electronic perinatal (e-perinatal) referral system, which improves the coordination and mechanisms of the referral and counter referral system in MCH by using ICT for monitoring the registration, efficient coordination of perinatal care of pregnant women, identifying high-risk groups and timely referral and child growth monitoring. The expansion of the e-perinatal referral system to tertiary level facilities would enhance timely referral and better coordination between different levels of health care provision.