

## Cambodia

### Update on the context and situation of children

Cambodia's economic growth is returning to pre-pandemic levels and is projected to reach 5.4 per cent in 2023, 5.8 per cent in 2024 and 6.1 per cent in 2025. Employment opportunities have improved across all sectors and household incomes are recovering. Most 'identified-as-poor' households have regained pre-pandemic income levels. 2023 data on child multi-dimensional poverty indicated a sharp decrease from 46.7 per cent in 2014 to 24.8 per cent in 2021. Elections to the Seventh Legislature of the National Assembly were conducted peacefully in July 2023. A new generation of leaders from the ruling Cambodian People's Party herald a significant political transition – they quickly adopted the Pentagonal Strategy Phase 1 (2023–2028), the vision for national development.

Maternal and child health and nutrition are improving and the equity gap is narrowing, particularly in antenatal care, immunization and some nutrition outcomes. While Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets for child mortality and stunting are on track, others for maternal mortality and child wasting are lagging. The 2023 Primary Health Care Framework and Community Participation Policy for Health provide solid foundations to strengthen primary healthcare systems and community engagement.

While enrolment in early childhood education and primary school retention have recovered from pandemic levels, learning outcomes still lag significantly, according to the 2023 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results. Girls outperform boys but do not transition equally to higher education; adolescent boys are increasingly withdrawing from education. Discussions with stakeholders resulted in a high-quality education-sector analysis; Cambodia's engagement with the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) was enhanced and USD 48 million mobilized for teacher development and improving learning outcomes.

In November, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) visited Cambodia. They recognized the country's achievements in protecting child rights, while encouraging the Government to fulfil its commitment by ratifying CRC Optional Protocol 3. They also stressed the importance of prohibiting corporal punishment and continuing to combat violence and sexual exploitation. Progress was made in ending child marriage (down from 19 per cent in 2014 to 18 per cent in 2022).

Progress has stalled in terms of safely managed water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. The climate rationale for WASH services in Cambodia produced by UNICEF in 2023 indicates that about 30 per cent of children are regularly affected by extreme climate-related events. Preliminary findings of Cambodia's Children Climate Risk Index indicate that most communes in the northeastern provinces and on the Tonle Sap plain pose the highest risks for children.

Increased budget allocations for social protection and social assistance rose to 4.6 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023, expanding the number of people benefiting from cash-transfer programmes. Subnational budget allocations for children and women continued to increase in 2023 and the Government adopted two sub-decrees that increased budget thresholds for social services, hygiene and the environment at district, municipality and commune/sangkat levels for 2024–2028.

### Major contributions and drivers of results

This is the final year of the current Country Programme (CP). UNICEF developed the new Country

## **Goal Area 1 – Every child survives and thrives**

2023 saw continued improvement in maternal, newborn and child health and nutrition (MNCHN). Cambodia has largely met targets for SDGs 2 and 3, although disparities remain. Despite a dip in quality and coverage of essential health services during COVID-19, most targets were met, with notable improvement from pre-COVID baselines. To improve quality and access to primary healthcare, new initiatives and partnerships were set up, particularly on data analysis, policy development, climate and environment, and addressing non-communicable diseases and injuries such as environmental health, mental health and road safety. UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health (MoH) to finalize new policies on primary healthcare and community participation, and initiatives to strengthen food systems and standards for commercially prepared complementary foods and school nutrition. All are important for achieving the goals of Cambodia's Fourth Health Sector Plan (2023–2030).

UNICEF strengthened collaboration with other ministries and United Nations agencies to improve maternal and child health and nutrition, including via digital innovations for health, climate-smart health facilities, Cambodia's first children's environmental health assessment, food systems analysis, adolescent engagement on healthy diets and piloting new district-level approaches to improve essential newborn care. Continued support to strengthening health systems and community engagement for MNCHN benefited 7,039 children with severe acute malnutrition: 605 health centres now provide treatment for malnutrition. UNICEF support to the nationwide introduction of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination has so far benefited 87,500 9-year-old girls. Communication and social behaviour change (SBC) support to MoH reached 5 million people, with 1,231,490 individuals engaged (including 619,989 women, 326,443 children/adolescents, 183,360 from ethnic minorities and 16,278 people with disabilities) on nurturing care for nutrition, mental health and environmental health.

## **Goal Area 2 – Every child learns**

2023 saw major scale-up of education initiatives towards SDG 4 targets, particularly the enhancement of quality education. UNICEF supported the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) to scale-up the Early Grade Learning Programme to 110,000 more students in 12 provinces, with results from UNICEF-supported studies showing significant improvement in reading and maths for Grade 1 students. However, PISA results (Cambodia joined PISA in 2022) found that only 8 per cent, 12 per cent and 10 per cent of 15-year-old students achieved minimum proficiency in reading, mathematics and science, respectively. The Local Life Skills Education (LLSE) programme also expanded significantly in 2023, with UNICEF supporting the material review and inclusion of new topics including climate change, mental health, gender equity, digital education and sexual and reproductive health. UNICEF continued to support MoEYS in quality early childhood education services for children, with support to community pre-schools helping to increase the number meeting minimum standards by 40 per cent since 2019. Teacher education was supported through the digital continuous professional development platform, revised teacher-education curriculum frameworks and the development of the Teacher Policy Action Plan. Significant support reinforced the inclusive policy environment through a comprehensive education-sector analysis and the SDG 4 mid-term review, both of which informed the development of a gender- and disability-responsive Education Strategic Plan. Capacity was built in about 300 female MoEYS officials at subnational levels, where they are underrepresented.

## **Goal Area 3 – Every child is protected from violence and exploitation**

There has been good progress in child protection – the Government and partners made significant efforts to meet SDG 5 and 16 targets. Free legal aid provided to children in contact with the law reached over 900 (more than double than in previous years). The number of children in residential care fell to 5,181 – a 24 per cent decrease from 2019. However, with more than 3.5 million children aged 1–14 years experiencing violent discipline in their homes, 11 per cent aged 12–17 exposed to online sexual exploitation and abuse, and over 2,000 children in conflict with the law in 2023, the right to protection is far from being realized. UNICEF invested technical and financial resources in strengthening child protection, including closing policy and legislation gaps. The endorsement of a comprehensive child-protection law stalled due to national elections but high-level advocacy, including a visit from the Chair and Vice-Chair of the UNCRC in November, ensured that this law remains a government priority. Efforts to engage the private sector focused on ending online sexual exploitation and abuse. Guidelines on child online protection for the information, communication and technology (ICT) sector (the first of its kind in the region) were developed and launched with UNICEF support, and senior staff of major ICT companies were trained in their application. UNICEF supported Government and partners to implement broadly targeted SBC initiatives to tackle social norms underpinning violence, abuse and exploitation of children, reaching over 6.4 million people.

#### **Goal area 4 – Every child lives in a safe and clean environment**

The Joint Monitoring Programme estimated in 2022 that Cambodia was making steady progress on access to basic WASH services, but that access to safely managed services had stalled. An estimated 30 per cent of Cambodia's children, in about 500 communities, regularly experience the effects of extreme climate-related weather events. These risks were mapped in the climate rationale for WASH services prepared with UNICEF support in 2023; UNICEF has shifted towards climate-risk-informed WASH programming. UNICEF continued to strengthen sector systems and capacities at both national and subnational levels: we analysed sector financing in terms of SDG 6 targets and strategic solutions; supported the improvement of essential regulatory/institutional functions within key line ministries; improved data collection and monitoring; and led the development of the climate and environment agenda for the 2024–2028 UNICEF Cambodia CP with particular focus on climate-resilient social services and environmental health.

#### **Goal area 5 – Every child has an equitable chance in life**

Milestones were achieved in social protection and public finance for children. UNICEF increased the availability of data for child-friendly policies and programmes, and helped advance the Government's decentralization and de-concentration reforms. UNICEF support advanced the shock-responsive social-protection agenda (the framework was officially launched in December), strengthening social assistance interventions in the COVID-19 response and cash-transfer measures to mitigate the impacts of seasonal floods and global inflation. Focusing on integrated child-sensitive, disability-inclusive social-protection initiatives, UNICEF facilitated the national rollout of a new disability identification system, the design and launch of the integrated family package and the technical and vocational education and training cash-transfer programme. UNICEF provided crucial evidence that doubled the benefit of one national cash-transfer programme. We also fostered digital transformation by establishing digital delivery systems and innovative monitoring and evaluation systems, and continued comprehensive capacity-building with government staff. UNICEF support and advocacy in public financial management (PFM), particularly the 'subnational budget in brief' and citizen budget and participation guidelines, helped to increase budget transparency and citizen participation. It also encouraged dialogue between the ministries of Economy and Finance and of the Interior, leading to the adoption of a solid social-service budget threshold in the sub-decree for the commune/sangkat fund. The costing of integrated social-assistance programmes and other child-sensitive programmes was integrated into the annual budget proposals of key line-ministries. Through UNICEF support, national civil society organizations (CSOs) built and deepened their PFM capacities.

## Cross-sectoral change strategies and enablers

The promotion of early childhood care and development (ECCD) was marked by the design and subnational delivery of the nurturing care parenting package, managed by the general secretariat for the ECCD national committee (GS-ECCD). The operationalization of the National Action Plan for ECCD to a second province, Ratanakiri, was another milestone. Kratie was the first province to operationalize its ECCD Provincial Action Plan – its provincial women and children consultative committee reported encouraging progress on the rollout of the parenting package. One refresher training on the package was organized for provincial and district facilitators – they in turn trained a range of frontline workers who then reached approximately 2,200 caretakers. According to Kratie Provincial Investment and Planning Division, provincial administration investment in social services contributing to early childhood development showed a modest increase to 7 per cent (from 5 per cent in 2022); while district investment in social services rose from 0.6 per cent in 2022 to 1.4 per cent; and commune/sangkat from 3.6 per cent in 2022 to 4.6 per cent. A further increase is expected from 2024/25 onwards thanks to the Government’s new sub-decrees earmarking budgets for social services from subnational administrations. Lessons learned and experiences from Kratie and Ratanakiri have been documented and will be used to develop national guidance to operationalize NAP-ECCD at subnational level. Close collaboration and technical support to GS-ECCD will continue to strengthen guidance, coaching and monitoring.

UNICEF engaged with young people representing provinces and ethnic groups to inform the latest situation analysis and new CPD. Adolescents raised their concerns about access to quality education and violence against children, and suggested how to increase their participation in decision making – these contributions are embedded in the new CPD. UNICEF support in Siem Reap and Battambang strengthened the knowledge and coordinating capacity of subnational authorities to implement the National Youth Policy and Action Plan. Systematic platforms for meaningful youth engagement were reinforced through youth participation in commune planning and budgeting and by recruiting youth representatives to commune committees for women and children. Some 205 adolescents (105 female) from 74 per cent of secondary schools in these two provinces built their 21st-century skills, including through a climate-change-focused life skills programme. Another 608 vulnerable students aged 13–18 (75 per cent female) benefited from a pilot school project, Youth Solar, to accelerate the green energy transition. Of 158 vulnerable young people (50 female) enrolled in vocational training, 31 per cent were placed in informal and 59 per cent in formal employment. Members of the Adolescent and Youth Reference Group raised awareness of children’s rights among 518,149 people (310,889 female) including 3,355 adolescents from marginalized ethnic communities.

Advances to promote gender equity included programmes to promote science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) for girls. The Skills4Girls initiative introduced secondary-school girls to digital devices and programming, and the focus on environment and climate change during the first hackathon (involving 50 girls) supported their understanding of emerging challenges and developed their technical skills. The Generation Future (GF) initiative, which supports promising ideas by young Cambodians through mentoring, is being integrated into the LLSE programme to promote sustainability; this was piloted in four schools in 2023 and includes scaling up projects such as Code for Girls. The GF and LLSE together create an ecosystem for volunteerism and skills development. UNICEF developed and finalized a country-office-specific Gender Action Plan (GAP), which aligns closely with the global UNICEF GAP. Three priority areas were selected for the new CP: maternal and child health, girls’ STEM education, and addressing violence against women and children. UNICEF contributed to the integration of gender in the new UNSDCF, helping to ensure that outcomes and outputs consider the different impacts on females and males, and how these can be properly monitored through disaggregated indicators.

With a focus on disability-inclusive social protection, UNICEF facilitated the national rollout of a disability identification system (DMIS), created in 2020 in partnership with Ministry of Social

Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation. In 2023, 307,206 persons with disabilities (including 25,646 children) were identified through the DMIS. In collaboration with UNICEF Innocenti, the UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO) and MoEYS, UNICEF undertook research in inclusive education to support the MoEYS vision of developing a disability-inclusive education system. Findings will inform the 2024–2028 Education Sector Plan and National Action Plan for Inclusive Education. Guided by the UNICEF Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy 2022–2030, UNICEF developed a country strategy note on disability inclusion in the next CP with a focus on strategic, thematic and cross-sectoral actions to ensure that children with disabilities have the same support, resources and opportunities as other children. As well as sector-specific interventions to support children with disabilities, UNICEF will invest in convergence and cross-sectoral coordination to generate evidence and strengthen information and service delivery to communities and children with disabilities.

UNICEF successfully implemented the cross-sectoral SBC strategy to enhance community engagement as a key CP strategy. UNICEF supported the MoH National Centre for Health Promotion and line ministries to adapt the regional SBC communication and nutrition curriculum and the global human-centred design for tailoring immunization programmes toolkit to the Cambodian context. Some 113 (52 female) subnational managers from multiple sectors were trained with key SBC skills and competencies to lead effective SBC and community engagement interventions for improved child health and development outcomes. UNICEF support for the GS-ECCD resulted in strengthened evidence generation and use of behavioural insights, demonstrated through the successful implementation of a baseline assessment for key parenting behaviours and a ‘nudge kit’ to promote critical parenting behaviours.

Leveraging the transformative power of digital technologies, UNICEF successfully implemented its Country Office Technology for Development Strategy to advance programme goals. Implementation focused on digital tools to improve programme effectiveness, system strengthening, real-time monitoring and adolescent/youth engagement. Tools include U-Report – which started with 8,900 subscribers (5,963 female) – real-time monitoring through mobile data collection tools such as ONA and a parenting tips chatbot. These technologies allow feedback from target communities and support data-driven decision making.

UNICEF accelerated its advocacy in responsible business conduct with key stakeholders such as the Chambers of Commerce and Ministry of Economy and Finance; we also co-hosted a child rights and business principles 10th anniversary forum with Save the Children. Around 50 representatives from the private sector, Government and development partners discussed the responsibilities of businesses to respect child rights – key private-sector actors committed to supportive action. Child online protection efforts were prioritized, and key stakeholders such as Smart Axiata and the European Chamber Digital and Technology Committee have become strong partners in implementing and promoting the child online protection guidelines. UNICEF also engaged with several private-sector actors including mobile network operators and the telecommunication regulator to roll out a digital platform that delivers positive parenting tips to both male and female parents and caregivers via interactive voice recording and text message platforms. UNICEF has been lobbying for this service to be available at no cost for the users or for UNICEF – negotiations are almost complete.

## UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF partnered with several government ministries to conduct Cambodia's first children's environmental health assessment. The child protection programme worked with six ministries and subnational institutions to advance the right to protection through policies, plans and standard operating procedures. In advancing the integrated social protection and PFM agenda and strengthening subnational approaches, UNICEF collaborated with government ministries and institutions and continued to play a central role in policy advocacy and education sector coordination by chairing the education sector working group and co-chairing the joint technical working group.

UNICEF coordinated the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) application, successfully securing the full allocation (USD 48.09 million) – we will support implementation as GPE grant agent. Collaboration with the Global Partnership to End Violence mobilized Government and the ICT industry to develop child online protection guidelines to ensure that digital products and services adhere to child rights and business ethics.

Partnership with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) developed a pilot faecal sludge management intervention in Kratie plus a proposal for grant resources to support it. South-south partnership with UNICEF China and the Chinese Government represents an innovative way to leverage technical and financial resources for climate-resilient WASH.

UNICEF leveraged partnership with European Union under the EU-UNICEF Regional Public Finance Facility Project to strengthen collaboration, particularly in increasing UNICEF and EU visibility in supporting fiscal decentralization, budget transparency, informing and consulting citizens for their annual budget formulation and adoption and citizens participation. UNICEF worked with the United Nations Development programme and the World Bank to provide evidence to inform policy and programme design. Collaborative efforts in social protection and PFM were accelerated through UNICEF participation in United Nations Joint Programmes, e.g. with the International Labour Organization and the World Food Programme (WFP) that expanded to include the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 2024. UNICEF, WFP and the Council for Agricultural and Rural Development conducted the Fill the Nutrient Gap and Cost of Diet analysis to inform the new National Strategy for Food Security and Nutrition. Through its focus on urban social protection, UNICEF also contributed to the joint-UN urbanization outcome of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework.

UNICEF has led the social assistance technical working group, convened by Government and relevant development partners – strategic partnerships will be established with the EU, Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and GIZ (Germany's development agency) in PFM, shock-responsive social protection and disability-inclusion. UNICEF engaged in the development partner committee of the PFM reform programme and has established successful working relations with the EU and ADB, co-chairs of the committee.

UNICEF joined the NGO Forum Budget Working Group to lobby for child-friendly national and subnational budgets and partnered with national celebrities, influencers and youth advocates to strengthen youth engagement initiatives for nutrition through the #FixMyFood campaign with UNICEF EAPRO. This has reached 403,000 and engaged 1,700 mainly young people online – the campaign will continue throughout 2024.

## Lessons Learned and Innovations

UNICEF supported the National Institute of Statistics to use geospatial technology to improve

population estimates, and the MoH on a new ‘family MUAC’[1] approach that increased community referral to nutrition services by 10 per cent. As more development partners support multiple initiatives, particularly in climate, digital and non-communicable diseases, UNICEF needs to articulate clearly its capacity for value-addition. In 2024, UNICEF will exert influence as the multilateral partner representative of the health technical working group and probably as the new Chair of the United Nations Scaling Up Nutrition network.

Through our support for capacity development, MoEYS key functions and national systems (policy development, planning, finance, human resources and learning assessment) have been strengthened. However, subnational capacity and education systems require further strengthening, particularly in the context of the decentralization and de-concentration reforms where substantial functional transfers to the district administration are planned from 2024.

Changes following the elections required additional efforts to sustain the political will on child rights created earlier. UNICEF used various strategies to engage the new Government on child protection issues, including stock-taking exercises and bilateral briefings with new leaders. The visit of the Chair and Vice-Chair of the UNCRC reinvigorated government engagement on child rights, and contributed to advocacy on urgent actions and legislative reforms, including the ratification of CRC Optional Protocol 3 (which will complete Cambodia’s child-rights framework). Building on this high-level advocacy, UNICEF is developing a child-rights advocacy strategy for the new CP, focusing on the implementation of the CRC recommendations.

As foundational work for the rollout of the 2024–2028 Climate and Environmental Programme and to support a fully fledged climate-risk-informed approach, UNICEF partnered with the Ministry of Environment to develop a subnational analysis of the children’s climate risk index to analyse, understand and measure the likelihood of climate, environmental and other natural/human shocks and stresses affecting children at provincial, district and commune levels. Once finalized (in early 2024) the model will be embedded into an interactive platform on the Ministry website.

UNICEF strengthened social protection initiatives using flexible digital tools and delivery mechanisms. Digital approaches were also used effectively in PFM and youth empowerment in local development. UNICEF made tremendous progress in helping the Government to operationalize disability-inclusive social protection through the DMIS and played a key role in coordinating the formalization of a related sub-decree. New sub-decrees were issued for district/municipality and commune/sangkat funds for 2024–2028 to support implementation; the DMIS facilitated the monitoring of COVID-19 vaccination rollout by the MoH and enabled proactive targeting to ensure that people with disabilities did not miss out on vaccination.

Informed by lessons learned and insights gained from the recent evaluations of the CP, child protection outcomes and the GF initiative, UNICEF continued to make adjustments to fit the evolving context. Evaluation management response actions were regularly tracked, and this year focused on their use in designing the 2024–2028 CP. UNICEF used evidence from the country-led evaluation of the cash-transfer programme for pregnant women and children under 2 years to lobby for doubling the benefit amount – this was implemented by Government from 1 August 2023. Studies and evaluations are approved in our integrated monitoring, evaluation and research plan and reviewed quarterly by the research, evaluation and studies committee. On the subnational approach, a key lesson has been the need for comprehensive support to social-service capacity building at district and commune levels. Future UNICEF work will be informed by a recent capacity assessment of subnational social-service delivery.

In 2023 the Country Office upheld the standards for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and child safeguarding and translated policies and procedures into practical actions. UNICEF piloted the integration of the core principles and standards related to child safeguarding into the

existing United Nations common PSEA assessment tool for implementing partners. The process was documented to inform the ongoing assessment of implementing partners and lessons learned shared with other country offices through the PSEA community of practice. As Chair of the United Nations in Cambodia PSEA Task Team, UNICEF also led the finalization and approval by the United Nations Country Team of standard operating procedures on the establishment of common community-based reporting and referral mechanisms, in a bid to promote a zero-tolerance culture and the rights of victims to receive assistance.

There were more than 40 million interactions (reaches and engagements) with our social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, X, Threads, LinkedIn, Tik-Tok), four times higher than this year's target. Several new campaigns were launched – one focused on combating online grooming and promoting online safety – it reached over 3.6 million people in three months through a set of sponsored digital assets created in partnership with Meta. Another striking campaign on climate change and the promotion of a healthy environment was launched on our digital platforms, reaching over 3.1 million people within four months. For World Children's Day, UNICEF outreach extended to over 2 million people during the dedicated fortnight. With more than 40,000 participants, it was the first decentralized event of its kind conducted by UNICEF in a remote province where vulnerable children rarely receive such exposure. The event engaged youth networks and 200 volunteers to educate them and promote child rights in their communities. The achievement proves that UNICEF needs to remain on the ground with World Children's Day and other communication events, strengthening the volunteers and activating them to speak up for UNICEF and child rights. Key to these successes was the close collaboration within the Country Office and SBC to craft accurate and engaging content; the increased production of video content; and proactive collaboration with United Nations agencies, CSOs, youth, digital creators and artists which broadened our reach. Amplifying the number of daily posts and using social media trends and live tools like Reels and TikTok shorts strategically fortified our capacity to generate viral content. These concerted efforts significantly elevated our visibility at national, regional and global levels, often cross-posted through global platforms. Achieving this level of production required dedicated human resources.

[1]Mid-upper arm circumference used to measure malnutrition in young children