

Malaysia

Update on the context and situation of children

Malaysia, an upper-middle-income country on the cusp of attaining high-income status, is home to 33.38 million people, with an estimated 9.13 million children[1]; of the latter, 1 in 20 have disabilities.[2]

In recent years, the Malaysian economy has been impacted by political changes and COVID-19 containment measures. A measure of political stability emerged in 2023, alongside a stronger fiscal outlook, with economic growth expected to meet the governmental target of 4 per cent.[3] Although rural absolute poverty is decreasing, it increased in urban areas, from 3.9 per cent to 4.5 per cent between 2021 and 2022.

In terms of social sector spending, education allocations are strong, at 15.4 per cent of the 2024 government budget (14.2 per cent in 2023).[4] Health comprises 10.6 per cent of the government budget, well below the 15 per cent Abuja target, but enough to provide Malaysians public healthcare at minimal cost. There is evidence of underinvestment in social assistance (allocations comprise just 1.2 per cent of gross domestic product), translating into gaps in social protection coverage. Only 26 per cent of the population is served by a social protection floor and under 2 per cent of children receive social assistance.

With its diversified economy, Malaysia attracts workers from across the region, and hosts over 180,000 asylum-seekers and refugees. Approximately 8.2 per cent of the population, including 4.2 per cent of children, are non-citizens,[5] comprising undocumented, stateless, refugee and migrant children. Children affected by migration are among the most vulnerable and face heightened risk of poverty, child labour and gender-based violence, including child marriage, abuse and exploitation. They also have limited access to education, health, legal protection, welfare and support services.[6] The under-five mortality rate is 25 times higher for migrant children compared to Malaysian children, and only 34 per cent of refugee children are enrolled in informal education.[7] Over 1,400 children are detained in immigration detention centres nationwide.[8]

Climate change effects are apparent in Malaysia. Intense flooding has become common, causing displacement and loss of life and property. Children are at high risk of climate and environmental shocks; those in marginalized communities even more so. Environmental factors such as air pollution, hazardous waste disposal and flooding, pose direct threats to children's health and wellbeing.[9]

Malaysian children face a triple burden of malnutrition, and food inflation pressures family food baskets. Only 60.2 per cent of children aged 6–24 months received a minimum acceptable diet and 46.5 per cent of children under five were anaemic. One in five children under five were stunted, and the prevalence of wasting (10.1 per cent), underweight (15.3 per cent) and overweight (5.6 per cent) is steadily growing. Disparities exist, with children from rural areas and indigenous children experiencing a significantly higher prevalence of malnutrition.

Mental health among adolescents has worsened, with 26.9 per cent reporting depression and increased feelings of loneliness and suicidal thoughts, especially among girls (36.1 per cent). Depression was most extreme among Bumiputera indigenous people in Sabah, but at slightly lower levels than reported for girls.[10]

In 2022, Malaysia registered a 99.3 per cent primary school completion rate, with girls more likely to enrol in secondary school.[11] Despite high education participation women do not participate equally in

public life. Malaysia's Gender Gap Index score was 0.707; with women comprising only 14.9 per cent of elected parliamentarians, the country ranked 122 of 142 for female political empowerment.[12]

There were 152,038 children recorded in the government disability registration system in 2022; this number is growing due to strengthened data collection and greater awareness of disability. However, only 25.3 per cent of primary schools were equipped with adapted infrastructure and materials for children with disabilities.[13];

Violence against children remains a concern in Malaysia. Close to half of parents believed parenting requires physical punishment. Two-thirds of children aged one to five experienced violent discipline and more than half endured psychological aggression.[14] Among adolescents, abuse at home was prevalent, with 7.5 per cent reporting physical abuse and 41 per cent reporting verbal abuse.[15] The reported number of sexual crimes involving children increased by 9.5 per cent between 2021 and 2022, and an estimated 100,000 children aged 12–17 years (1 in 25) are subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse annually.[16] At least 1,500 children end up in child marriage every year, although significant data gaps obscure the true number, which is likely higher.[17]

The youth unemployment rate among Malaysians aged 15–25 years stood at 10.7 per cent.[18] The Malaysian Youth Index revealed moderate youth quality of life and wellbeing, while their political and civic engagement remained low; youth interest in political activities actually declined over the past five years.[19]

The Human Rights Commission Act (Amendment 2023) was passed this year, strengthening the role of the Children's Commissioner to protect and promote children's rights. Since ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1995, Malaysia submitted its second report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2021, and is preparing for the committee's review in 2024.

[1] DOSM, *Children Statistics Malaysia*, 2023.

[2] Ministry of Health, *National Health and Morbidity Survey 2019*, 2020.

[3] Central Bank of Malaysia, *Economic and Financial Developments in Malaysia: Third Quarter of 2023*, 2023.

[4] Ministry of Finance, *Budget 2024 Highlights*, 2023.

[5] United Nations Economic and Social Council, *UNICEF Malaysia Country Programme*, 2022.

[6] UNICEF, *Migration and child protection risks*, 2023.

[7] Asia Displacement Solutions Platform, *Realising the Right to Education for Refugee and Stateless Children in Malaysia*, 2023.

[8] Selangor Journal, *KDN hopes for priority to welfare, better asset capability*, 2023.

[9] UNICEF, *Impact of climate change on children*, 2021.

[10] NHMS, *Adolescent Health and MCH*, 2022.

[11] DOSM, *Children Statistics*, 2022.

[12] World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report*, 2023.

[13] UNESCO, *SDG4 Country Profiles Malaysia*, 2022.

[14] NHMS, *Maternal Child Health*, 2022.

[15] NHMS, *Adolescent Health*, 2022.

[16] ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, *Evidence on Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*, 2022.

[17] UNICEF, *Beyond marriage and motherhood and Ending child marriage*, 2023.

[18] DOSM, 2023.

[19] IYRES, *Malaysia Youth Index 2020*, 2021.

Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF works at national and subnational levels to advance child rights. In January 2023, following Malaysia's general election, the UNICEF Country Programme in Malaysia implemented an enhanced level of cooperation with relevant national partners. Together with a range of stakeholders and partners, UNICEF utilized data to promote child-friendly policies and expand access to services for all children in Malaysia, including the most marginalized.

Support in strengthening Malaysia's policy framework and advocating for children and families

In 2023, UNICEF actively advocated for children and youth needs to be reflected in national policies. The Malaysia Country Office produced a comprehensive Landscape Analysis and support for nutrition-related regulations to lay the foundation for Malaysia's Nutrition Act. On behalf of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD), UNICEF led the development of the National Child Policy and is currently engaged in drafting the accompanying Plan of Action.

The right of children to a clean, safe and healthy environment is reflected in the National Planetary Health Action Plan, National Mineral Policy and 2024 budget consultation processes by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability (NRES) and the Ministry of Education (MOE). Advocacy for and with young people has been a focus at key regional and global climate and disaster risk reduction events, at the Asia-Pacific Climate Week; through engagements and events in the lead-up to and at the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28); and with inputs to the government at the mid-term review of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. Advocacy efforts targeting youth, media and government stakeholders were strongly led and supported by four youth climate champions and two youth who represented Malaysia at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Dialogue on Skills in October 2023.

UNICEF also provided thought leadership and used data and evidence to advocate for the most marginalized children. A crucial piece of work this year was providing technical assistance and advocacy to strengthen the mandate of the Office of the Children's Commissioner, a close partner of UNICEF. The proposed enhanced mandate will provide a stronger voice for children and increase accountability and visibility of children's rights.

In 2023, Malaysia achieved significant milestones in its efforts to establish a more child-friendly justice system. As a result of sustained advocacy and technical engagement by UNICEF, crucial amendments were made to the Sexual Offences against Children Act and Evidence of Child Witness Act. These amendments specifically addressed sextortion and livestreaming of child sexual abuse, delineating them as distinct offences. The amendments also allow for complete pre-recording of child victims' evidence; restrict inappropriate questioning in court; and extend the existing protections in the Evidence of Child Witness Act to all children under 18.

UNICEF's #SayaSayangSaya social media campaign for young people, on self-love, healthy relationships and prevention of online sexual exploitation and abuse, reached close to 500,000 on Instagram, with 3.9 million video views. To accelerate inter-agency partnerships, UNICEF led a delegation of five ministries and two non-profit organizations to the second ASEAN ICT Forum on Child Online Protection, which led to the drafting of a multi-sectoral action plan on child online protection.

UNICEF focused its advocacy on strengthening Malaysia's social service workforce. The Heroes Among Us campaign, launched in partnership with the Malaysian Association of Social Workers (MASW), created positive visibility of social workers as the frontline workforce responding to child abuse, neglect and violence, reaching 3.6 million people on social media, and generating 23 newspaper articles and radio and television interviews. The campaign raised the visibility of the social work

profession and provided evidence-based advocacy for the tabling of the Social Work Profession Bill.

UNICEF provided high-level inputs to government to enable the integration of refugee and undocumented children into national education systems, resulting in a joint advocacy brief with UNHCR; a UN-wide advocacy paper on access to education for undocumented children in Sabah; and the publication of a five-year national progress report on Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) in Malaysia. UNICEF has also been actively advocating against recently proposed regressive amendments to the Federal Constitution which would increase the risk of childhood statelessness.

UNICEF engaged in strategic advocacy to support the government in establishing alternatives to immigration detention, and concluded a mapping study on children in immigration detention with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA). In addition, UNICEF advanced its policy dialogue with the government, foreign missions and non-governmental organizations on strengthening intersections between anti-trafficking and child protection mechanisms to build inclusive child protection systems and avoid a siloed approach when addressing child trafficking.

UNICEF continued its engagement with private sector stakeholders, civil society, children and young people to evaluate and positively leverage businesses' impact on children. Engagements included issues related to vulnerable children on oil palm plantations; unhealthy food retail environments; protecting children in digital spaces and the integration of children's rights in sustainable business practices. UNICEF also encouraged business partners to strategically consider children's rights through the National Action Plan for Business and Human Rights. This included integrating children and young people's experiences, concerns and recommendations in the baseline assessment report following a virtual consultation with diverse groups of young people from across Malaysia. Additionally, UNICEF convened and mobilized child rights civil society organizations to highlight and advocate for children's concerns in the wider business and human rights consultations.

In 2023, UNICEF solidified its support to sub-national authorities, especially in Sabah and Sarawak, to enhance advancement of child rights at local council and state level. These efforts, a response to addressing disparity, are aligned with the 12th Malaysia Plan. Through these partnerships, UNICEF is developing models on integrated social protection, child participation and measurement of child wellbeing for scale-up.

World Children's Day (WCD) created space to engage with parliamentarians, policymakers, ambassadors, young people, partners, and donors. A collaboration with Malaysia's Parliament saw five children address Members of Parliament and guests on topics such as inclusion, mental health, climate action and participation. The #PictureMyRights photo contest attracted 307 entries from diverse young people aged 13–24 years, including refugees. The contest illuminated children's rights, hopes and challenges from the perspective of young people, emphasizing every child's right to express themselves and be heard. Winning entries were displayed in Parliament, with an additional 20 featured on major digital billboards around Klang Valley. The photo contest garnered 15 media articles with a public relations value of MYR 147,000 (US\$ 30,900). The WCD-themed football match hosted by UNICEF corporate partner Johor Darul Ta'zim (JDT) Football Club and a disability-inclusive football clinic by JDT Academy youth facilitated engagement with team supporters, UNICEF donors and other partners.

Building an evidence base on the situation of children in Malaysia

UNICEF was active in generating evidence and data to advance child rights. Efforts in 2023 included the country-led evaluation of the diversion pilot – an initiative to prevent children in conflict with the law from adverse effects of the formal child justice system – which was finalized with the full ownership of government. The study found that the pilot had made notable strides to advance the best interests of children in conflict with the law. The Government of Malaysia is now considering the

extension of the diversion pilot in 2024.

UNICEF made significant contributions to the development of the Social Protection Framework and the review of the National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), both led by UNDP, increasing the reflection of children in these documents, and enabling a Child MPI to be derived from the national one.

UNICEF strengthened its capacity and that of government partners to ensure good use of public finance for children. In this regard, UNICEF supported a country-led evaluation of the impact of sugar-sweetened beverage taxes. The resulting data has contributed to improved tax policy and encouraged international benchmarking to identify best practices. It also laid the groundwork for future tax policies addressing broader public health concerns.

UNICEF extended its flagship Families on the Edge study to understand the impact of the increased cost of living among households living in low-cost flats in Klang Valley and Penang. Preliminary findings point to a reduction in consumption and heightened anxiety caused by increased prices.

UNICEF completed a comprehensive study on birth registration of children affected by migration in Peninsular Malaysia to inform policy dialogue and advocacy. A call to action was issued based on the almost 500 respondents including government officials, non-profit organizations and refugees and migrants.

UNICEF remained a leading voice on ending child early and forced marriage. The Country Office has continued to support the Government in implementing the National Strategic Plan in Handling the Causes of Child Marriage and provided technical assistance to its mid-term review; and has recently submitted a concept note to MWFCDD to support Factor 6 (coordination of marital data and underage divorce) of the National Strategic Plan. UNICEF also provided technical support to women and girl-led organizations and networks working on ending child marriage, such as the Pelajar Bukan Pengantin Coalition (#SchoolsNotSpouses), and contributed to national discourse on finding ways to end child marriage via media, such as the Astro Awani+ “It’s About YOUth” interview reaching 20,000–60,000 television viewers and 1.8 million subscribers on YouTube.

To diversify, strengthen and expand UNICEF’s partnerships, two nationwide stakeholder mapping analyses of women and girl-led organizations and networks and organizations of persons with disabilities, were undertaken in 2023. The recommendations are expected to strengthen joint advocacy for the promotion and protection of rights of children living with disabilities.

Other evidence-generation initiatives included Pathways to Employability, a study on youth not in employment, education or training; an investigation into adolescent mental health; a Malaysia profile on the `_pathways_to_adolescent_pregnancy` with UNFPA, part of a wider Southeast Asia and Pacific study on trends and patterns surrounding marriage and motherhood; research on challenges in birth registration for children affected by migration; child labour and other protection risks of migrant children living on oil palm plantations in Sabah; and the creation of the National Youth Mental Health Index.

Modelling innovation to advance the rights of children

In 2023, UNICEF continued laying the groundwork for inclusion of children affected by migration in the national child protection system, beginning with a targeted approach in Penang where UNICEF is working with state authorities, UNHCR and local actors to pilot a stronger and more refugee and migrant-inclusive social service workforce at the sub-national level. Beyond capacity building, consultations were held to address coordination bottlenecks and expand referral pathways for refugee and migrant children in need of child protection services.

Recognising the importance of local government in the implementation and development of national and sub-national policies, efforts were invested in the successful implementation of the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI). Petaling Jaya was recognized as the first Child-Friendly City in Southeast Asia, and an exchange between Southeast Asia and Europe inspired the Sarawak government to create a Sarawak State Children's Council. A Malaysia CFCI model is now being developed to support the scale up and sustainability of the initiative in the country.

With the Sarawak Ministry of Women, Early Childhood and Community Wellbeing Development (KPWK), UNICEF developed a Child Wellbeing Index applicable to urban, semi-urban and rural populations, including indigenous and undocumented children, as an extension of the existing Sarawak Wellbeing Index. UNICEF also designed a novel, integrated social protection programme and secured approval for a longitudinal impact evaluation on three one-stop early childhood intervention centres for children with developmental delay and disabilities. These efforts will not only benefit policies and child outcomes in Sarawak, but also provide good examples for nationwide replication.

UNICEF supported the MOE to employ innovative technology, including artificial intelligence and machine learning, to enhance their capacity and identify children who are at risk of dropping out of school and design targeted interventions for them. The partnership with MOE and technological partners (Google, Microsoft, Apple) was solidified through the launch of the National Digital Education Policy and technical support on the strategic framework and action plan for the Digital Education Learning Initiative Malaysia (DELIMa 3.0), designed to strengthen the country's digital ecosystem. To date, the learning platform has served more than 400,000 teachers and 4.25 million students.

In partnership with MOE and other partners, UNICEF supported Future Skills for All, which is an online platform to facilitate teaching and learning of digital skills and computer science, designed to reduce inequalities in digital and skills development and has benefited 47,750 primary and secondary students and teachers in more than 3,740 schools, garnering 1.3 million views. UNICEF and partners, including Malaysia Federation of the Deaf, also developed materials in sign language for deaf children and offline kits for children in hard-to-reach areas or with connectivity difficulties, such as indigenous and undocumented children. UNICEF partnered with MOHA to expand the platform to children in institutions under the Malaysian Prison Department.

The work on inclusive digital transformation and future skills development via DELIMa has been recognized as a good practice for South-South Triangular Cooperation on transforming education and delivering on SDG4, leading to Malaysia's selection as one of six Learning Innovation Pioneer Countries globally, and positioning UNICEF as key partner to the government in pioneering innovations for learning.

UNICEF pursued regional engagement on behalf of national partners. In November, UNICEF organized a roundtable attended by high-level legal and judicial personnel from the United Kingdom and Malaysia, in which the judiciary committed to further strengthen the criminal justice system for child victims and witnesses. UNICEF also collaborated with UNFPA to accelerate South-South cooperation through a Southeast Asia Partners Roundtable on Child Early and Forced Marriage. The roundtable will kickstart the development of a regional commitment and action plan to end child marriage in Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Cambodia and Laos.

Parenting programming was identified as key to ending violence against children. Jointly with the National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN), UNICEF and other partners, initiated adaptation of existing disability-inclusive positive parenting modules to incorporate gender-transformative content and approaches as part of a global UNICEF initiative being rolled out in 12 countries. A pilot programme with the Community Development Department (KEMAS) pre-school

system was launched to determine the most effective modality to reach parents of more than 200,000 enrolled students with positive parenting content. Parenting modules were also tested with Rohingya refugee communities.

Child nutrition remained an area of particular concern in Malaysia. In alignment with the Government's National Strategic Plan to Combat the Double Burden of Malnutrition Among Children, UNICEF supported the design and testing of promising models. These included the research-based Growth Monitoring Promotion Programme to tackle infant and child wasting; the school-based C-Hat project to address obesity; and the pilot Centralized Healthy Kitchen programme to address stunting.

UNICEF established a strategic partnership with the Health Education Division of the Ministry of Health (MOH) and MOE to contextualize a Health Promoting Institution Implementation Guide for Malaysian schools, which brings a whole-school approach to health and wellbeing of children and adolescents. UNICEF also collaborated with the Institute for Health Behavioural Research (IHBR), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris and stakeholders from various divisions within the MOH, to develop a health behaviour change module to be embedded in national health officer training programmes.

In 2023, UNICEF focused on empowering youth through civic participation and skills building. Over 11,000 young people, including those with disabilities and from indigenous communities, were engaged on issues that matter most to them, and equipped with the necessary skill-sets to effectively advocate for meaningful change. To amplify the impact, UNICEF created platforms for these empowered youth to influence both their peers and decision-makers. Youth in the Young Leaders' Programme volunteered for community outreach to low-income children and met with parliamentarians to advocate for the improvement of conditions for marginalized children in national policy considerations; while KitaConnect and the Malaysian Youth Council focused on building soft skills to empower children and adolescents in their advocacy projects, and in speaking for the rights of adolescent girls. The Youth-Led Action Initiative also supported four young people to become trailblazers in youth advocacy and subsequently raise a cohort of over 100 young advocates through cascade trainings.

Responding to the high prevalence of depression among youth aged 15–24 years, UNICEF raised awareness on mental health and supported the government to analyse the existing mental health system and identify gaps in service provision. Based on recommendations from UNICEF's Strengthening Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Systems and Services report, IHBR, the Institute for Youth Research (IYRES) and UNICEF launched an awareness campaign to ascertain barriers to help-seeking behaviour and inform interventions. As a result, a resolution paper was developed and is currently poised for cabinet review.

UNICEF supported the MOH by ensuring their participation in global trainings and by contributing to the drafting of Malaysia's first comprehensive action plan for child and adolescent mental health.

The Youth Environment Living Labs (YELL), a joint programme with UNDP, supported by Amanah Lestari Alam, worked with government partners and youth networks to promote young people's participation in climate and environmental action, equipping them with valuable skills and networks. UNICEF supported transformational solutions to increase climate literacy among children and disaster preparedness via the MyUNICEF Impact Challenge, a partnership with the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI) and Malaysian Research Accelerator for Technology and Innovation (MRANTI). UNICEF also built children's capacity to monitor air quality via a citizen science approach, through the Air Quality Monitoring in Schools project.

UNICEF supported communication for development centres at three public universities to generate evidence on behavioural drivers and social norms, support the government and civil society

organizations to incorporate human-centred design in their initiatives, and advocate for social and behaviour change (SBC) in Malaysia. A notable advocacy effort was the first Asia-Pacific regional SBC symposium, co-hosted by three universities and UNICEF. The symposium gathered participants from across seven countries and various sectors, generated rich media coverage and served to establish a strong network of SBC practitioners.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Partnerships remained at the heart of UNICEF's work to advance child rights and drive results for children. UNICEF engaged with national government partners towards achieving strengthened laws, policies and institutional reform. These include the judiciary; MWFC, including Department of Social Welfare (JKM) and *LPPKN*; Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission; KEMAS under the Ministry of Rural Development; MOHA, including Immigration Affairs Division, Council of Anti-Human Trafficking and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants, National Registration Department, and Immigration Department; Attorney-General's Chambers and Bar Councils for Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak.

On youth engagement and climate action, UNICEF partnered with NRES, MOSTI, MRANTI, Malaysia's National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA) and MOE. UNICEF worked with MOE and MOHA to expand educational programming for children in education institutions under the Prison Department. Alongside ILO, UNICEF collaborated with the Ministry of Human Resources and MOSTI Sabah, among others, on a report about youth not in education, employment or training.

IHBR, IYRES, the National Centre of Excellence for Mental Health and Malaysia Community-based Mental Health Service were key collaborators on mental health programming, and MOH, including the Nutrition Division, on strengthening infant and child health.

UNICEF engaged with champions on child rights, such as the new Minister for Law and Institutional Reform and the Office of the Children's Commissioner, and strengthened partnerships with members of Parliament, MASW, and the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on the Sustainable Development Goals. A strong partnership with the European Union, including through its cross-regional programme Protecting Children Affected by Migration, was particularly fruitful. The Office of the Children's Commissioner and the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia continued to be essential partners on ending violence against children in all its forms.

UNICEF collaborated with sub-national government entities. In Sarawak, these included the KPWK, the Ministry of Housing and local entities participating in the CFCI; and the Ministry of Education, Innovation and Talent Development Sarawak and Sarawak Education Department on inclusive digital transformation. UNICEF partnered with the Sabah Environment Protection Department on a community-based air quality monitoring programme in schools; in Johor with Iskandar Regional Development Authority to implement the Iskandar Malaysia Eco-Life Challenge programme; and in Penang with the state Executive Council, JKM and State Health Department on a migrant and refugee-inclusive child protection system.

In 2023, the partnership and expertise of civil society organizations remained essential to UNICEF's work. These included Women's Aid Organisation, Women's Centre for Change, Voice of the Children, Childline, Monsters Among Us, End Child Detention Network, International Detention Coalition, HOST International, ENGENDER, Penang Working Group and Penang Refugee Network in support of children affected by migration; MASW on parenting interventions and the Heroes Among Us campaign; Pelajar Bukan Pengantin (#SchoolsNotSpouses) on ending child marriage; and Malaysia Federation of the Deaf to develop inclusive learning materials co-created with children with disabilities. To promote youth engagement and develop innovative solutions to issues affecting

children and youth, UNICEF engaged with social enterprises and youth partners, YELL Network partners and the Youth Climate Champions.

Collaborations with local research institutions also advanced evidence generation, including on child poverty and child wellbeing. In 2023, these included Swinburne University Sarawak and Sarawak Digital Economy Corporation on inclusive digital transformation; NADMA and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia on development and implementation of child-centred disaster risk management strategy and initiatives; University of Oxford and *Universiti Putra Malaysia* on scaling up parenting interventions; and National University Malaysia on disaster risk reduction capacity-building.

UNICEF teamed up with JDT Football Club and IPG Mediabrands to amplify children's rights during WCD. Technological partners Google, Microsoft, Apple, and CelcomDigi played important roles in supporting the strategic framework, action plan, and programmatic interventions for DELIMA.

UNICEF actively engaged with members of the UN Country Team, including the Resident Coordinator's Office, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, IOM and ILO, on programmatic reporting and review; monitoring and evaluation; sustainable development goal monitoring; preventing sexual exploitation and violence; and a UN-wide advocacy paper on access to education for undocumented children for the Sabah government. UNICEF chaired UN-wide surveys, participated in joint contracts, and led the Operations Management Team and Administrative, Supply and Finance Working Groups. UNICEF also chaired and engaged closely in the UN Social Protection sub-group.

As part of the UN Migration Working Group, UNICEF collaborated with UNHCR and IOM on strategic advocacy around child immigration detention and child trafficking. The partnership with UNHCR was key in laying the groundwork in Penang and Johor for better inclusion and protection of children affected by migration.

The global UNICEF-WHO Joint Programme on Mental Health, in which Malaysia actively participated, as one of only two countries from the East Asia and Pacific region, significantly enhanced mental health support for adolescents in the country. This collaboration included Malaysia's active involvement in the global meeting in Tunisia. Representatives from MOH, alongside WHO and UNICEF, attended this meeting to foster international cooperation and exchange in mental health efforts. UNICEF collaborated with UNFPA, including as co-chair (alongside ECPAT) of the Technical Working Group on sexual and reproductive health education. UNICEF and UNFPA mobilized regional government and community stakeholders to kickstart a commitment and action plan to end child marriage in Malaysia.

UNICEF provided inputs and technical advice to the development of the Social Protection Framework and the review of the National MPI, both led by UNDP. UNICEF and UNDP also partnered on the successful YELL youth climate programme and on integrating children's concerns and views in the National Action Plan for Business and Human Rights.

Finally, regional collaboration within UNICEF included the sharing of best practices and lessons learnt with other Country Offices; providing opportunities for Malaysian youth to speak at Regional Office and Headquarters-led engagements; and strengthening internal risk assessment capacity in partnership with the Regional Chief of Operations.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Programming should take both a localized and whole-systems approach to achieve maximum effectiveness. Existing guidance for global programmes needs to be deconstructed and contextualized to Malaysia, and sufficient human resources directed at intense engagement during the initial years of

implementation. Tailored community-based interventions, particularly for marginalized populations, must be prioritized.

Where possible, it is crucial to design interventions for the most marginalized children within mainstream systems, instead of creating parallel systems of service provision. Strengthening coordination and intersections between the child protection system and anti-trafficking measures, for instance, avoids duplication of efforts and resources and is a more effective approach to combating child trafficking. Establishing digital learning communities alongside platforms will maximize their successful and sustained use. In future, a focus on high-impact programmes is necessary to support transformation at scale, while ensuring capacities of our partners are adequately built, and partners are diversified to include those operating in the gender equality and disability movements.

Ensuring inclusivity and access to participation can lead to greater programmatic impact. When engaging online, digital technology should be designed and used with disability inclusion in mind. In this regard, expanding the Picture My Rights exhibition to the metaverse for World Children's Day reached more people across Malaysia and globally, and ParentText, a chatbot parenting intervention, delivered positive parenting content and advice in an easily accessible way.

The highest degree of participation in the 'Level of Child Participation' model is attainable, if youth are supported by a long-term commitment from persons they trust, receive training from persons who respect them, and are in a safe space where they can express their opinions and creativity. Children's participation should be coupled with adult willingness to listen and be held accountable for their proposals. Engagement with youth advocates and champions has helped UNICEF ensure the relevance of advocacy messaging and increased impact among our youth target group. The UNICEF Youth Climate Champions, two of whom are on the COP28 Consultative Panel, have exerted strong policy influence due to their direct access to policymakers.

Strengthened partnerships with the government and other partners have resulted in innovations for learning, such as the use of artificial intelligence to better identify at-risk students and implement targeted interventions and innovative programming on DELIMa. From the start, UNICEF adopted an equity and intersectional approach to the DELIMa learning platform. As a result, 50% of teachers participating in DELIMa are serving marginalized children and those in rural communities. The platform has also been expanded for use by children in institutions under the Malaysian Prison Department.

To achieve results, UNICEF actively strengthened and diversified partnerships and voices. This included parliamentary engagement, and leveraging and learning from Malaysia's strong women's movement, including partnering with women's groups and civil society organizations to advocate on children's issues.

Reports and campaigns on mental health revealed three primary barriers to adolescent mental health: inadequate community-based mental health services, prevailing stigma and the requirement of parental consent for accessing services. Fragmentation in the Malaysian social protection system and lack of integration with other key services has been widely evidenced; piloting solutions to identified bottlenecks is helping bring concrete and constructive discussions to the table.

Evidence and data are key to securing buy-in from partners. Evidence on existing deprivations, as well as related solutions, needs to be backed up by strong economic and financial arguments. Where data are missing or national engagement weak, sub-national pilots that generate evidence of feasibility, both operational and financial, of a new approach can be a powerful tool. The close monitoring of programmes can ensure they are not impeded by absence of data. In this regard, access to comprehensive and consistent financing data is vital for evidence-based policymaking, enhancing accountability, and facilitating necessary adjustments to allocate resources efficiently and equitably.

UNICEF has effectively leveraged opportunities at the sub-national level, building relationships and pilot initiatives, including modelling a migrant-inclusive child protection system in Penang. In-country capacities can be increased by pairing sub-national institutions with international firms. For example, in the CFCI Situation Analysis in Sarawak, UNICEF's sponsorship facilitated ministry and city council members' participation in the CFCI Southeast Asia-Europe exchange. This, in turn, led the Sarawak KPWK to advance the establishment of a state children's council and support the CFCI initiative in Sarawak. As part of this process, an international holder of a long-term agreement with UNICEF was paired with universities to transfer skills and knowledge to sub-national counterparts.

Internal task forces to support the implementation of strategies to end child marriage; protect children affected by migration; and address rights of vulnerable populations in Sabah and Sarawak have led to improved collaboration and teamwork across sections and generated more impactful results and should therefore be continued.

Knowledge and awareness of UNICEF's work for children in Malaysia are still very much at surface level. To achieve more presence, the Country Office will increase visibility on local actions and programmes, including WCD, which provide opportunities to champion child rights and (re)open conversations with prospective partners.

Carrying these lessons forward, and building on current achievements will lead to enhanced, sustainable realization of rights for all children in Malaysia.