

Lesotho

Update on the context and situation of children

In 2023, Lesotho faced substantial multifaceted economic challenges, stemming from a combination of the long-term repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine, alongside enduring structural issues within the country itself. Additionally, Lesotho's inherent vulnerability to climate-related shocks played a role in exacerbating these economic difficulties. The country's financial situation was particularly strained, as evidenced by the projected widening of its fiscal deficit to 7.9% of GDP for the fiscal year 2022–23. This was primarily due to a reduction in revenue from the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) and the increased burden of high food and fuel prices. Nevertheless, Lesotho's economy showed some resilience, with an estimated real GDP growth of 1.9% in the fiscal year 2022-23 [1]. A modest improvement to 2.3% growth was projected for the subsequent year, indicating a slow positive economic trajectory [2].

Despite a strong overall commitment to social sector spending, with approximately 12% of the total government expenditure (equating to 7% of GDP) allocated to social protection in the fiscal year 2021-22, specific focus on children's needs was notably lacking. The allocation of these funds showed a marked imbalance, with significant portion directed towards subsidies for civil servant and military pensions, rather than towards programs directly benefiting children [3]. This imbalance was evident in the comparatively limited resources dedicated to child-specific social assistance programs. While there was a notable increase in the budget allocated for school feeding programs, critical areas such as child grants and Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) bursaries remained underfunded. These areas required further attention, adjustments, and expansion to ensure they effectively meet children needs, particularly the most vulnerable.

In the fiscal year of 2022-23, the Government of Lesotho (GOL) maintained its budgetary allocation for the health and education sectors at 13% and 11% respectively, mirroring the commitments of the 2021-22 fiscal period. Within the education sector, expenditure was largely directed towards recurrent costs, especially staff salaries, thus prioritizing basic primary and secondary education funding. However, this emphasis on recurrent costs has left only a scant amount for capital expenditures, which are predominantly funded by donor contributions. The health sector received 13% of the total budget, falling short of the 15% threshold set by the Abuja Declaration. The quality of primary healthcare services continued to be a concern, affecting maternal healthcare, immunization, and nutritional services.

Despite various programs aimed at reducing child poverty, children remain disproportionately affected. While multidimensional child poverty rates declined from 65% in 2014 to 45% in 2018, a resurgence is anticipated due to the negative repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic[4]. The dearth of recent data on maternal and child health outcomes has been a persistent challenge. To monitor progress towards global targets, UNICEF relied on population surveys from 2014-2018, global projections, estimates, and sporadic administrative data.

The COVID-19 pandemic detrimentally affected health programs and disrupted the continuum of primary healthcare services, exacerbating a decline in vaccination coverage in prior years, which led to over 4000 zero-dose children. This was followed by a lethargic recuperation of health systems, further hampered by reduced domestic health expenditure.

UNICEF successfully undertook a comprehensive situational analysis of children, adolescents and Youth (2023) and is currently supporting the completion of the national Demographic Health Survey. Despite high rates of skilled birth attendance, at an estimated 87% coverage[5], Lesotho suffers a high mortality rate, estimated at 566 per 100,000 births[6]. The quality, rather than the availability, of services presents the primary challenge. Newborn mortality rate stands at an estimated 35 per 1000 live births, accounting for 50% of under-five deaths (3rd highest in the region)[7].

Lesotho grapples with the world's second-highest HIV prevalence rate, 22.7%[8], with adolescents aged 10–19 showing a prevalence of 3.8%. Notable gender disparity exists, with 4.38% females and 2.8% males affected, attributed to risk factors (e.g., sexual and gender-based violence, early sexual debut). Although antiretroviral coverage for children and adolescents living with HIV (ages 0-19) has increased from 53.5% (2018) to 81% 2023 [DHIS, October 2023], it lags behind the 90% target [UNAIDS Estimates, 2023]and is significantly lower than adults coverage.

Malnutrition remains a critical factor in newborn and child mortality, with a 34% stunting rate[9] and prevalent anemia among pregnant women, particularly adolescents (20% of this demographic). This is exacerbated by inadequate Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) practices.

Access to water, sanitation, and adoption of good hygiene behaviors continue to be challenges, especially in rural areas where 34% lack basic water access and only 51% have access to basic sanitation services. Twenty percent of the rural population still practices open defecation[10], with frequent climatic events (e.g., droughts, floods) worsening the situation.

Food insecurity remains acute, as the latest Lesotho Vulnerability Assessment shows about 245,000 rural individuals (16% of the population), in IPC Phase 3 (Crisis level) or worse. This is due to factors such as extreme weather conditions, high food prices, and inflation, compounded by a scarcity of labor opportunities. Despite these challenges, markets have remained functional, providing some food availability. Projections for October 2023-March 2024 suggest that 325,000 people (22% of the population), may face acute food insecurity, with 8 districts potentially reaching IPC Phase 3 due to potential El Nino effects[10].

Primary education is mandatory and free, with a net enrollment rate of 85% and a high retention rate until graduation[11]. However, teacher strikes, and the pandemic have impacted the quality of learning. Recent evaluations reveal that half of fourth and sixth graders lack essential reading and numeracy skills[12]. Prior to the pandemic, only 45% of students aged 7-14 acquired core reading skills, and 15% demonstrated foundational math skills[13].

[1] IMF, Staff Report for the 2023 Article IV Consultation, July 2023

[2] Ibid

[3] Ibid

[4] Kingdom of Lesotho, Voluntary National Review on the implementation of the SDGs Report 2022

[5] Lesotho MICS 2018

[6] Child Mortality and Stillbirth Estimates

[7] Ibid

[8] LePHIA 2020

[9] Lesotho MICS 2018

[10] Lesotho DHS 2014

[11] Ministry of Education and Training, 2020, Education Statistics Bulletin

[12] National Learning Assessment 2021

[13] Lesotho MICS 2018

Major contributions and drivers of results

Goal area 1

In 2023, UNICEF Lesotho has further cemented its role as a key player in bolstering the quality of integrated maternal neonatal child health (MNCH) services. This commitment has manifested through the enhancement of primary health care and the institutionalization of community health initiatives. With a focus on evidence generation and advocacy, UNICEF has targeted newborn healthcare to address the high rates of newborn deaths. The Perinatal Problem Identification Programme has been instrumental in monitoring and identifying causes of perinatal deaths, facilitating technical support, and integrating MNCH services into quality improvement plans across three hospitals. Community health, recognized as the backbone of primary healthcare, has seen significant advancement through UNICEF's efforts. The equipping of village health workers (VHWs) with standardized tools and the development of the Community Health Worker Master List registry system have been pivotal in enhancing outreach to those most in need. Aiding this endeavor is the development and digitization of community health monitoring and evaluation tools, with a pilot scheduled for early 2024, signaling a leap towards more efficient and impactful health interventions. Addressing the dual challenges of humanitarian crises and development, UNICEF has adopted integrated approaches, particularly in tackling nutrition-related issues. With the support from the Government of Japan and partnerships with CSOs, UNICEF has fortified community resilience, enabling communities to better respond, cope, and recover from humanitarian shocks. This is exemplified by the provision of essential services such as food, nutrition, water, and child protection in deprived rural communities, benefiting hundreds of households and schools. At the national level, UNICEF has supported the Ministry of Health to enhance dietary diversity through community-based interventions in Infant and Young Children

Feeding (IYCF) and HIV across all districts. This led to thousands of mothers and caregivers receiving education and counselling, and a significant number of children receiving micronutrient powders. This heightened level of counselling services has been made possible through the collaboration with CSOs and multisectoral district nutrition teams, funded by the United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth and Development Office. UNICEF's efforts have also extended to direct healthcare interventions, with thousands of pregnant women receiving iron-folate supplements and Vitamin A supplementation being administered to tens of thousands of children. Additionally, children suffering from severe acute malnutrition have received crucial treatment across outpatient and inpatient care centres. In the fight against HIV, UNICEF's technical support to the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission chapter of the National AIDS Commission has been vital. The organization has played a significant role in closing treatment gaps for children and adolescents, implementing combination prevention interventions, and advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programs for young people. The integration of COVID-19 vaccination into routine immunization and primary healthcare showcases UNICEF's adaptability and collaborative spirit. The procurement and deployment of over 1.4 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines, along with significant contributions to the country's cold chain capacity, underscore the organization's pivotal role in Lesotho's health sector. Lastly, the increase in the fully vaccinated population against SARS-COV-2 to 60% and the integration of COVID-19 vaccination campaigns with other initiatives like HPV vaccination reflect UNICEF's dynamic approach to public health challenges. Despite a slight decrease in overall immunization coverage, high coverage for Pentavalent vaccines has been maintained, and Measles first dose coverage has seen an increase, indicating resilience and continued focus on immunization programs.

Goal area 2

In 2023, UNICEF strengthened its collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), building on the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to reinforce education systems. This partnership aimed to ensure the continuity of learning and resilience, honoring the commitments made at the Transforming Education Summit. Recognizing the necessity for adaptable learning approaches, UNICEF, in alliance with MOET and the Ministry of Information, Communications, Science, Technology and Innovation, advanced the GIGA initiative. A comprehensive mapping of 1,783 schools for internet connectivity revealed only 93 connected schools, highlighting the need for enhanced digital access.

UNICEF's technical assistance was pivotal in deploying the Learning Passport, focusing on capacity building within MOET's IT department and the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) to foster content creation and curation. The Learning Passport has registered 9,486 users to date, providing supplementary learning materials that bolster educational and skill acquisition efforts.

Furthering its commitment to adolescent development, UNICEF partnered with Selemela Learning

Network to craft a lifeskills training manual, educate 28 Youth Development Officers, and train 350 peer educators aged 16 to 24. Additionally, 2,500 adolescents enriched their lifeskills through the Lifeskills Through Sport programme, implemented by Kick4Life in various districts, targeting marginalized youth.

In collaboration with MOET, UNICEF supported the inaugural Early Childhood Care and Development sub-sector review, with the outcomes set to guide the forthcoming three-year implementation plan. This step is part of UNICEF's broader agenda to enhance data quality and evidence generation, as demonstrated by the release of delayed education statistics for 2020 and the completion of data collection for subsequent years.

Inclusion and disability mainstreaming in education have been key focuses, in partnership with MOET, the Lesotho National Federation of Organizations of the Disabled (LNFOD), and NORAD. As the Coordinating Agency for the Education Sector, UNICEF has capitalized on the 2022 momentum to engage the private sector in educational investments. This culminated in commitments from major corporations, including the Vodacom Lesotho Foundation, Econet Telecommunication Lesotho, and Standard Lesotho Bank, pledging USD 3.4 million to support an application to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), targeting innovative financing opportunities.

UNICEF's initiatives reflect a steadfast dedication to enhancing educational opportunities and fortifying the infrastructure necessary for the development and well-being of children and youth in Lesotho. Through these multi-faceted partnerships and strategic interventions, UNICEF continues to champion a resilient, inclusive, and evidence-based approach to education, setting the foundation for sustained progress and alignment with Lesotho's National Development Plan.

Goal area 3

In collaboration with the Ministry of Gender, Youth, and Social Development (MoGYSD), UNICEF has launched a national response plan to end violence against children in Lesotho. This comprehensive strategy coordinates multiple ministries—including social development, gender, health, education, and police—to implement prevention and response mechanisms against child violence. As a result of these enhanced capacity-building efforts and the strengthening of district child protection teams, a substantial increase in children receiving multi-sectoral prevention and response services has been observed. In 2023, a total of 5,326 children (2,960 females and 2,366 males) benefited, marking an almost five-fold increase from the previous year and slightly exceeding the cumulative target of 5,000 for the year.

Furthering its commitment to creating safe educational environments, UNICEF has worked with the MoGYSD and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to develop guidelines for the prevention of School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV). These guidelines aim to fill the existing gap in clear directives at the school level, equipping school communities with the necessary tools to prevent SRGBV and foster an enabling environment for children and adolescents.

In partnership with The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), UNICEF has supported the Government of Lesotho in enhancing access to gender-based violence (GBV) risk mitigation, prevention, and response services. This includes the social marketing of the Nokaneng app, through which 23,153 girls and women received essential services such as psychosocial support and counseling, enabling GBV survivors to receive assistance efficiently and safely.

Advocacy efforts with partners and the National Leadership Group have led to the establishment of the Social Service Workforce (SSW) bill, aimed at the professionalization of the workforce. This initiative includes a mapping of the SSW, set to be completed in 2024. Additionally, the much-delayed amendment of the Child Protection and Welfare Bill 2022 is now in the final stages of legal review, with enactment into law expected in early 2024. A milestone achievement is the initiation of the country's first-ever Child Protection Policy, with UNICEF providing the necessary financial and technical support.

UNICEF's support extends to the Department of Home Affairs, particularly in the automation of health facilities and community councils to accelerate birth registration. The development of a digital mobile notification system promises to facilitate easier access to birth registration services, particularly for those in remote areas. This has contributed to an increase in birth registration for under-five children, with the cumulative proportion registered rising to 80 percent in 2023. Additionally, UNICEF is involved in evaluating the country's CRVS strategic plan ending in 2023 and in formulating a new five-year strategy.

Efforts to expedite the resolution of violence against women and children have also been initiated, with assessments of police stations and magistrate courts to provide child-friendly services. This assessment has led to the engagement of a consulting firm to install audio and security equipment in two pilot districts—Mohale's Hoek and Thaba-Tseka—with completion expected in February 2024.

Goal area 4

In its quest to improve sustainable access to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) services in Lesotho, UNICEF has been a staunch ally to the Water Commission, offering both technical and financial support. This support has significantly enhanced the WASH sector's coordination, facilitating the development of crucial national guidelines and strategies.

A Climate Landscape Analysis for Children carried out by UNICEF has mapped key engagement entry points and identified potential interventions within the climate, energy, and environment sectors. This analysis also included a thorough stakeholder mapping and the pinpointing of funding avenues for UNICEF's forthcoming country programme.

Building on the regional training on the WASH in Healthcare Facilities Improvement Tool (WASHFIT) held in 2022, UNICEF trained 20 trainers who subsequently educated 35 staff members from the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ministry of Health across all districts in 2023. The WASHFIT methodology and tools have been tailored to Lesotho's specific context, informed by assessments conducted in 184 healthcare facilities. Additionally, UNICEF has aided the WASH sector in the creation of guidelines to bolster the implementation of the WASHFIT methodology.

Through a partnership with Catholic Relief Services, UNICEF has upskilled 1,451 community members (789 males and 662 females) on climate-resilient WASH strategies in 10 communities and 15 schools, impacting 1,699 learners in Semonkong and Ha Mohale, Maseru.

Advocacy efforts for Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH), championed by UNICEF in concert with the Queen's Trust, have culminated in a government call to action, committing to the expansion of the MHH programme in Lesotho. In line with these efforts, UNICEF has also facilitated the procurement and distribution of sanitary towels to 5,400 schoolgirls. These concerted efforts reflect UNICEF's dedication to promoting hygiene and health, as well as ensuring the dignity and well-being of children and communities in Lesotho.

Goal area 5

UNICEF's efforts were pivotal in contributing to Goal Area 5 of their Strategic Plan, ensuring that every child had access to inclusive social protection and lived free from poverty. By fortifying the social protection system, UNICEF facilitated equitable access to services for vulnerable children.

Collaboration with the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning was crucial in effecting Public Financial Management Reforms and enhancing budget transparency, making the budget more child-focused. Additionally, UNICEF's work improved the Bureau of Statistics' capacity to generate child rights evidence and conduct poverty analysis, promoting data-driven policymaking.

A key aspect of UNICEF's strategy was the strengthening of the social protection system, which included enhancing the social registry, refining targeting mechanisms, and fostering digital payment solutions. In line with the Equitable Lesotho programme, these efforts streamlined service delivery and transitioned approximately 9,418 beneficiary households to a mobile-based payment system within the Child Grant Programme, thus improving its efficiency.

The collaboration with the Lesotho Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MoFDP) built upon the foundation laid in 2022 with the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF). UNICEF supported the MoFDP in updating and aligning the national budgetary system to prioritize child-focused outcomes. Beyond advisory support, UNICEF contributed financial resources for district-level budget consultations across all ten districts, which enhanced local understanding of the budgetary process and engaged youth and local CSOs. The publication of four comprehensive budget briefs for the 2021/22 fiscal year highlighted financial allocations essential for child welfare.

Working in collaboration with PARIS21, UNICEF supported the Bureau of Statistics (BOS) in initiating the process of reviewing the Statistics Act, thus enabling the BOS to produce higher quality and timely data on children. The 'Lesotho Multidimensional Child Poverty Supplementary Report, 2023, enriched with global indicators, offered a detailed view of child poverty and its gender and disability implications.

UNICEF's support strengthened the technical capabilities of the BoS. Specialized training and skill development enhanced staff proficiency in conducting detailed child poverty assessments that meet international standards. These capacity-building efforts have improved data analysis and reporting, providing policymakers with the necessary insights to create evidence-based, child-centric policies.

Gender

UNICEF took a comprehensive and gender-focused approach to its programmes, which were meticulously tailored to meet the specific needs of adolescent girls, young women (AGYW), and young mothers. This strategy was multifaceted, intertwining various aspects of health, education, and

protection. Central to this approach was the active involvement of Adolescents and Young People (AYP) in advocating for enhanced health, education, and protection services. Their participation was crucial in ensuring these services were finely tuned to their unique needs. Alongside this, peer-led interventions played a pivotal role in fostering social behavior change and enhancing social accountability. These interventions successfully reached about 23,000 individuals, with a notable majority being females, providing them with vital information on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), HIV, mental health, COVID-19, and Human Papillomavirus (HPV).

Through the UNICEF Global Fund partnership, UNICEF commissioned technical assistance to develop a livelihood and economic strengthening model aimed at HIV prevention among adolescent girls and young women. This initiative was not just a health intervention but also an empowerment tool, economically enabling young women. In tandem, UNICEF also focused on assessing the socio-behavioral characteristics of the partners of AGYW. This assessment was geared towards establishing standards of care for adolescent boys and young men, thereby acknowledging and addressing their role in the health and well-being of AGYW.

Moreover, in a collaboration with the Vodacom Foundation, UNICEF took significant strides in promoting digital literacy. This effort culminated in equipping 761 girls with advanced coding and digital skills, marking a milestone in bridging the digital divide and empowering young women.

Social and behavioral change

Leveraging the successful strategies developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF's Social and Behavioral Change (SBC) initiative expanded its reach through integrated community engagement programs. These were executed in collaboration with Civil Society Organizations and contractors across various sectors including nutrition, immunization, WASH, education, and child protection. Within the realm of nutrition, SBC's involvement was pivotal, enhancing data collection tools and aiding in the effective rollout of programs. Targeting four districts plagued by high rates of malnutrition, SBC's data collection efforts sought to identify and dismantle the barriers impeding the prevention of malnutrition and the utilization of health services by women, also emphasizing the supportive role of men in these communities.

The data gathered spearheaded a male-led community drive through nutrition clubs, culminating in the engagement of 14,831 men and 30,000 women. These participants were equipped with essential skills in Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF). Building upon this, a social accountability facet was seamlessly integrated, facilitating interface meetings between healthcare providers and caregivers, thus fostering transparent dialogue and collaborative problem-solving.

The program also incorporated a robust communication strategy that delivered integrated messages emphasizing COVID-19 awareness among men, the importance of childhood vaccinations, and the promotion of hygiene practices. Complementing these efforts, UNICEF embarked on a mission to strengthen the capabilities of 42 SBC focal points from the Ministry of Health and partner entities, grounding their approach in the fundamentals of SBC. This initiative paved the way for evidence-based interventions, the co-creation of public health campaigns with the Ministry of Health, and their execution through Civil Society Organization partners.

In an innovative intervention, UNICEF supported young individuals in leading a data collection exercise using the BeSD framework, which informed the strategic design of an ongoing COVID-19 vaccination campaign aimed at youths and caregivers responsible for child vaccinations. This initiative also fueled a far-reaching social media campaign that achieved significant traction, with engagement from roughly 400,000 individuals and a staggering reach exceeding 1 million.

Simultaneously, a social listening exercise was put into motion, its outcomes poised to further refine and tailor messaging to resonate with the target audience. These multifaceted efforts epitomize UNICEF's commitment to nurturing a responsive and proactive community engagement environment, where data-driven insights lead to impactful health interventions and stronger, healthier communities.

Disability

UNICEF Lesotho, in partnership with the Lesotho National Federation of the Disabled (LNFOD), has played a pivotal role in disseminating the transformative Disability Equity Act, enacted in March 2021. This critical legislation paves the way for the effective implementation of the Inclusive Education Policy and the National Disability Mainstreaming Strategic Plan 2021–2025, marking a significant advancement in disability rights in Lesotho. The collaboration reflects a commitment to creating a more inclusive and equitable society, where the rights of individuals with disabilities are recognized and upheld.

Through its partnership with NORAD, UNICEF has become a leading advocate for disability-inclusive programming in the country. This advocacy is vital in ensuring that disability considerations are integrated into all aspects of programming and policy-making, thereby fostering an inclusive environment for all. This approach not only aligns with international standards on disability rights but also ensures that Lesotho's developmental efforts are inclusive and equitable.

A key aspect of this partnership has been the focus on providing assistive technology devices and specialized computer software to support the education of children with disabilities. The impact of this initiative has been significant, reaching a total of 9,964 children, including 1,164 with disabilities. This endeavor demonstrates UNICEF's commitment to leveraging technology to enhance learning experiences and accessibility for children with disabilities, ensuring they have the necessary tools to participate fully and equally in educational settings.

Moreover, UNICEF's support to MOET in adapting teachers guides into braille has been a game-changer for visually impaired teachers, granting them greater autonomy and effectiveness. Additionally, the distribution of 200 sign language dictionaries to primary schools marks an important step in supporting the linguistic development of hearing-impaired learners, promoting their academic and social inclusion.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF Lesotho's strategic journey aligns closely with the developmental objectives of the Kingdom of Lesotho, integrating global mission directives with localized priorities. This alignment is actualized through strengthened partnerships with a diverse array of stakeholders, including key government ministries, civil society groups, and influential entities in the private sector. These partnerships are critical to enhancing a Results-Based Management (RBM) system and establishing a solid Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework. The intent is to drive initiatives that not only create significant impact but are also thoroughly evaluated for effectiveness and congruence with Lesotho's developmental benchmarks.

The collaboration strategy is designed to reinforce accountability and results-oriented planning, which are central to achieving sustainable and measurable outcomes. By engaging in such strategic partnerships, UNICEF Lesotho ensures that every initiative is not just a fleeting effort but a step towards long-term sustainability. This approach is also reflected in the organization's commitment to capacity building within these systems, ensuring that the local entities are equipped with the tools and expertise to continue these efforts independently in the future. The strategic formalization of these partnerships, particularly through the execution of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), signifies a significant milestone in UNICEF Lesotho's operational strategy. The engagement with Her Majesty Queen Masenate Seeiso and notable foundations, such as Vodacom Lesotho, is reflective of the influential support that bolsters UNICEF's agenda. Additionally, forging new connections with academic institutions like the National University of Lesotho and diverse civil organizations extends UNICEF's collaborative web, creating an ecosystem of shared knowledge and resources that are pivotal for collective impact.

At the grassroots level, UNICEF's concerted efforts with community-based organizations (CBOs) have borne fruit in critical child development domains. Focused initiatives such as parenting education programs, systematic early identification of disabilities, and active mobilization for preschool enrollment showcase a deep commitment to not just addressing immediate needs but also building sustainable community-led structures for child development. These initiatives prioritize contextually relevant solutions that resonate with and are embraced by local communities, thereby enhancing the efficacy and longevity of developmental interventions. In line with its strategic goals, UNICEF has established a partnership with Selemela Learning Network, a youth led organization, focusing on life skills development. This collaboration, executed jointly with the Ministry of Gender, Youth, and Social Development's Department of Youth, is a key step towards enhancing youth capabilities and participation.

In the broader schema of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), UNICEF's role exemplifies a commitment to multilateral cooperation. This is exemplified by the shared planning, execution, and evaluation of development projects in concert with other UN agencies, ensuring a united front in addressing the multi-dimensional challenges faced by Lesotho. The emphasis on a harmonized approach underscores the importance of synchronization in international development efforts, aiming to maximize the collective resource utilization and impact.

Expanding the horizons further, UNICEF Lesotho's international collaborations have catalyzed its capacity to address complex challenges like HIV/AIDS, nutrition, and Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH). By aligning with global NGOs such as Catholic Relief Services and World Vision International, and a dedicated consortium for children with disabilities, UNICEF Lesotho has expanded its outreach and fortified its advocacy for child rights. These partnerships facilitate integrated community-based interventions, which are instrumental in delivering a comprehensive response to the intersecting issues affecting children's welfare.

In this concerted effort, UNICEF Lesotho stands out as an exemplar of strategic, evidence-based, and partnership-oriented development practice, integral to advancing the principles of Results-Based Management within the realm of international development and cooperation.

UNICEF Lesotho's engagement with the private sector has proven instrumental in championing child rights and education. The collaboration with the Lesotho Chamber of Commerce and Industry under the Lesotho Private Sector Initiative for Education exemplifies the strategic use of corporate resources and influence to advance educational access. This initiative underscores the significant role that the private sector plays in societal development, particularly in enhancing the quality of education available to children.

The organization's dedication to bolstering social protection mechanisms is evident in the strides made to expand and modernize the National Information System for Social Assistance (NISSA). By

digitizing social grant payments, UNICEF Lesotho, in concert with the Ministry of Social Development, the World Bank, and the European Union, has significantly strengthened the support network for Lesotho's most vulnerable groups. This digitization initiative marks a pivotal step towards an efficient and transparent social support system, reducing barriers to accessing vital assistance for those in need.

A cornerstone of UNICEF Lesotho's efforts has been supporting Public Financial Management (PFM) reforms in partnership with the Ministry of Finance. These reforms are geared towards increasing fiscal transparency and fostering public involvement in how resources are allocated. Engagements with youth organizations and academic institutions have been crucial in obtaining high-quality, youth-informed data to guide policy decisions. Collaborative efforts with organizations like PARIS21 have also been vital in enhancing the Bureau of Statistics' ability to produce reliable data focused on the well-being of children.

In alignment with Lesotho's overarching development objectives, UNICEF Lesotho's initiatives are in sync with the country's National Development Plan (NDP) for 2023-2030. The organization's unwavering commitment to partnership, innovation, and evidence-based advocacy sets the stage for continued progress in improving child welfare and developmental outcomes in the region. Through these concerted efforts, UNICEF Lesotho is not just responding to immediate needs but is also investing in the long-term prosperity and well-being of children across the nation.

UNICEF Lesotho's enhanced partnership strategy was bolstered by renewed engagements with leading public donors such as the EU, USAID, Japan, Norway as well as private foundations such as the Roger Federer Foundation. The innovative groundbreaking partnership model from the GPE saw UNICEF leverage significant funding from a consortium of private sector entities. In sum, UNICEF Lesotho's dynamic partnership strategy, invigorated by renewed commitments from prominent public donors and private foundations, underscores the power of collaboration in promoting sustainable development and profoundly impacting children, families, and communities. This framework, merging global and local partnerships, affirms UNICEF's unwavering commitment to ensuring a thriving future for every child in Lesotho.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

UNICEF's strategic engagement in Lesotho has garnered critical insights and fostered innovative approaches, bolstering the nation's healthcare infrastructure. The organization's experiences underscore the necessity of holistic, flexible, and data-informed strategies to effect enduring health improvements.

During emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF demonstrated the critical nature of

agile resource management. The organization capitalized on investments made in response to the pandemic to fortify routine immunizations and the health system at large. This included creating a community health information system and a georeferenced master list of Community Health Workers to enhance governance and service delivery in community health. These initiatives have also served to outfit maternal and newborn wards with the necessary equipment for pediatric intensive care.

The value of reliable data in shaping advocacy, policy-making, and program development cannot be overstated. Enhanced information systems for immunization, neonatal care, and community health have been instrumental in guiding decisions, underlining the importance of data-led health strategies. UNICEF's commitment to developing a robust community health information system has laid the groundwork for improved data gathering and management, facilitating decisions that are driven by evidence. Village Health Workers have proven to be vital in accessing remote communities, further informing UNICEF's advocacy for a comprehensive community health strategy and the institutionalization of community health services.

Additionally, UNICEF's support of the National University of Lesotho Innovation Hub has yielded inclusive designs for hand hygiene stations. These stations, after being produced and installed at eight test locations, are now poised for market rollout.

UNICEF Lesotho's capacity to swiftly adapt and incorporate both low- and high-tech solutions, especially in the realms of education and child protection, has been identified as a key insight for expansion. Critical to this adaptive process was the support from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), the Ministry of Gender, Youth, and Social Development (MGYSD), and the collaboration with the Ministry of Information Communication Technology along with telecom companies, which was instrumental in advocating for continued investment.

The span of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022 marked a pivotal moment for the HIV response, underscoring vulnerabilities due to interrupted services. The diversion of health services to combat the pandemic resulted in a noticeable dip in HIV-related outcomes. Nevertheless, this challenging time also showcased the HIV program's resilience and underscored the imperative to respond to unforeseen challenges rapidly. Innovations like multi-month dispensing of Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) and differentiated service delivery models, including outreach programs and camps, were instrumental in maintaining HIV care continuity, particularly for children and adolescents.

A salient lesson from this era was the absolute necessity of flexible program strategies capable of withstanding unexpected disturbances. Another significant insight was the recognition that age-appropriate messaging and actively engaging young people for feedback are crucial for effective program execution. These methods improved service provision and bolstered the connection between community services and healthcare facilities, placing the needs and perspectives of the youth at the center of the initiatives.

Faced with shrinking resources for HIV programs, UNICEF Lesotho adopted an integrated approach, capitalizing on synergies across various thematic areas like nutrition, immunization, community health, and maternal and neonatal health. This integrative strategy enabled UNICEF Lesotho to secure USD 1.8 million from non-traditional partnerships, enhancing nutrition and immunization programs.

In social protection, the development of Lesotho's National Information System for Social Assistance (NISSA) has delivered pivotal insights, emphasizing that its update is more than a routine procedure; it is a multifaceted operation requiring particular expertise. The 2022-2023 pilot revealed that specialized enumerators are essential for efficient execution. While Social Workers' involvement is beneficial at certain stages, their diversion from core duties of direct social support suggests the necessity of a dedicated data collection and management task force. Strengthening IT/IS infrastructure and human resource capacity within the social protection system is also critical to ensuring data integrity and enhancing social service delivery.

In public finance, fully adopting and operationalizing the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) and Program-Based Budgeting (PBB) remain top priorities. Adequate financial and human resources to support the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning are crucial, requiring comprehensive training and a culture shift towards fiscal accountability and transparency.

The Bureau of Statistics is pivotal in generating and analyzing child-focused data. Investing in their capacity is imperative, necessitating a multifaceted approach that not only hones statistical skills but also ensures a deep understanding of child rights in data collection and the ability to translate data into actionable policy insights.

Additionally, UNICEF Lesotho has distilled essential insights from its strategic endeavors, sharpening its focus on child welfare enhancement. This process has reinforced its commitment to children's rights, backed by a strong, multi-channel engagement strategy that emphasizes structured coordination and dynamic management. These channels have been pivotal in elevating the voices of the youth, ensuring their perspectives and needs are at the forefront of UNICEF's mission.

Social media has been a transformative tool for UNICEF Lesotho, significantly widening its audience and increasing its social media presence. This digital expansion has facilitated enhanced interaction with a broader demographic, particularly benefiting from the U-Report platform's capacity to foster direct communication with young people.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF Lesotho has amplified its community engagement strategies, capitalizing on the resilience and adaptability developed during the global crisis. This strategic pivot is reflected in improved health indicators, such as the rise in vaccination rates and greater compliance with health programs, indicating a positive shift towards better health outcomes for children.

Research practices within UNICEF have undergone a dynamic transformation, integrating modern techniques to conduct and disseminate high-quality studies. This modernization has bolstered the organization's strategic decision-making and knowledge management, essential for informed planning and policy formulation.

Finally, the year has been characterized by deepening cooperative relationships with government entities and key stakeholders, fostering partnerships founded on shared objectives and collective responsibility. Effective partnerships developed included one on social norms and child rights with Her Majesty, development of technological skills for adolescents' girls with Vodacom Foundation and one with the National University of Lesotho.