

El Salvador

Update on the context and situation of children

El Salvador has consistently reduced multidimensional poverty rates, declining from 35.2% in 2015 to 26.0% in 2022. However, households with children and adolescents remain the most disadvantaged (33.1%), reflecting the need for sustained investment to guarantee children's rights. El Salvador has made progress in this area, increasing the budget allocated to early childhood development by 11.7% compared to 2020.

After one year of complete school closure and two years of blended and voluntary in-person attendance due to COVID-19, 2023 marked a significant milestone with the resumption of 100% in-person schooling. This in-person return facilitated educational continuity and progress in learning recovery, with a particular focus on literacy and mathematics, which have shown the most substantial gaps since the onset of the pandemic (World Bank, 2023).

In 2022, 34% of girls received the final dose of the Human Papillomavirus vaccine, underscoring the significance of expanding coverage equitably to protect girls and boys from various types of cancer. Further, the newly-released 2022 National Mental Health Survey revealed that 54.8% of adolescents experience anxiety symptoms, while 40% exhibit depression symptoms. The National Integrated Health System (SNIS) continues to encounter challenges in ensuring quality and integral services for children and adolescents.

Malnutrition remains a challenge; official data shows that 8.3% of children under 5 are overweight, and 5% have low weight-for-age. Additionally, only 43.5% of children under 6 months are exclusively breastfed, highlighting the need to redouble efforts to promote and support breastfeeding, especially in the workplace.

The entry into force of the "*Ley Crecer Juntos para la Protección Integral de la Primera Infancia, Niñez y Adolescencia*" (referred to as the "*Crecer Juntos*" Law) has resulted in enhancements for the full exercise and enjoyment of the rights of children and adolescents. These improvements include the protection of children's rights in virtual environments, a more comprehensive regulation of the rights of children with disabilities, and the introduction of social inclusion programmes for adolescents in conflict with the law within the Child Protection System.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), however, highlighted opportunities to further strengthen the law, particularly in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, physical punishment, the rights of pregnant girls and adolescents in conflict with the law, and budgetary considerations. The CRC also pointed to a need to reinforce regulatory frameworks related to early marriage/unions to protect girls and adolescent women against gender-based violence and its consequences.

In December, the Legislative Assembly approved, for the 21st time, the extension of the State of Emergency for an additional 30 days to combat gang violence. This measure involves the suspension of certain constitutional rights, including freedom of association, the right to be charged within 72 hours or released, and the right to public defence before the courts. It also increases the military presence in urban and peri-urban communities. According to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, by November 2023, more than 73,272 people had been detained. The exact number of children and adolescents left without parental care due to the detention of their parents or caregivers, remains unknown.

The homicide rate has shown a consistent decline, decreasing from 7.8 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2022 to 2.3 in 2023. Despite this trend, violence against girls and adolescent women remains a significant and persistent challenge. According to the most recent "Report on facts, status, and situation of violence against women, 2022," there are 204.4 reported cases of sexual violence per 100,000 girls. For adolescents, this figure rises to 806.57. El Salvador has one of the highest fertility rates in girls and adolescents in the world, with 5.89 births per 1,000 girls (10-14 years old) and 54.44 per 1,000 adolescents (15-19 years old) (UNFPA, 2023). The continuum of violence affecting this population has irreversible impacts on their development, particularly on their physical and mental health.

In 2023, mixed migration flows in Americas reached record-breaking figures. Between September 2022 and August 2023, UNICEF El Salvador identified a total of 4,377 foreign nationals in transit through the country. Of these, 62.4% were children and adolescents.

Migrants, particularly children, women, pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, LGBTIQ+ persons, and those with disabilities, face challenges in accessing essential emergency services such as maternal and child health, early development, education, water, sanitation and hygiene, and protection. Additionally, they are at heightened risk of physical and psycho-emotional violence, including gender-based violence, as well as family separation and use and utilization by organized crime groups along the migration route. Addressing these complex issues requires an integrated humanitarian response that ensures their protection while addressing migration root causes.

El Salvador is facing growing vulnerability to climate change. In May, tropical storm "Pilar" impacted over 900 households. Approximately 67% of the national territory is within the Dry Corridor, affecting around 2.2 million people, with 54% of which whose livelihoods depend on agriculture (FAO). Drought conditions exacerbated by the "El Niño-Southern Oscillation" phenomenon worsens their poverty conditions and climatic vulnerability. This contributes to heightened food insecurity, child malnutrition, and the prevalence of water-borne diseases. Twenty-three percent of the national population experience food insecurity (FAO, WFP 2023), while the prevalence of acute malnutrition stands at 2.9% (Ministry of Health, 2021).

The upcoming presidential and legislative elections in 2024 present new opportunities to further advocate for and prioritize children's issues on the public agenda.

Major contributions and drivers of results

In 2023, UNICEF El Salvador assessed the country's progress and challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to children. Key challenges include the imperative to boost immunization, enhance literacy and math skills, eliminate violent discipline and early unions, ensure access to basic sanitation and hygiene services, and combat poverty in households with children and adolescents.

This enabled UNICEF to identify accelerators for achieving the 2023 goals. These include the implementation of strategies for social and behavioural change to promote positive parenting practices, foster new masculinities, prevent early pregnancy, and promote health and nutrition in families.

UNICEF further supports sectors in implementing the "*Crecer Juntos*" Law, focusing on strengthening the social protection system to be shock-responsive, among other initiatives. This contribution is reflected in the National Strategy for Sustainable Development, guided by the "leaving no one behind" principle and presented by the United Nations System to the National Council for Sustainable Development.

The "*Crecer Juntos*" Law began its implementation in 2023, with new institutions and procedures. Through collaboration with the National Council for Early Childhood, Childhood, and Adolescence (CONAPINA), UNICEF supported the enhancement of staff technical capacities from diverse sectors to implement the new legislation in line with international standards and the 2018 concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child for El Salvador. Capacity building efforts also reached key members of the specialized child protection and justice systems.

UNICEF provided technical assistance for the update of the "*Plan Brazos Abiertos para la atención integral de niñez y adolescencia migrante*". This sought to enhance the services provided by the Child, Adolescent and Family Attention Centres (CANAF) on reintegration of returnees, focusing on specialized and gender-sensitive programming.

UNICEF also supported quality and accessibility strengthening of early childhood development services. This was achieved through the design of the Strategy for the Recovery and Expansion of Coverage of Early Childhood in the Education System, aiming to increase kindergarten enrolment until 2030. The strategy focuses on promoting essential life skills in children.

In the context of SDG 3, UNICEF's advocacy efforts supported the updating of the national

vaccination schedule. The revised schedule now includes five new vaccines—Chickenpox, Hepatitis A, Hexavalent, Pneumococcus, and Human Papilloma Virus—made available for children under 9 years old. This expanded vaccination programme is expected to benefit nearly 1 million children and other vulnerable populations, including pregnant women, ensuring their equitable access to safe, efficient, and high-quality vaccination services.

UNICEF further contributed to reducing vaccine loss rates. This was achieved by strengthening processes for vaccine management, storage, and distribution (cold chain), as well as providing essential supplies to The Ministry of Health (MINSAL) for the proper storage and distribution at the local level, focusing on coverage in remote areas. With these supplies, UNICEF reached nearly 52% of health facilities within the public network for the adequate storage of vaccines.

UNICEF further supported the vaccine monitoring system strengthening by procuring tablets for health providers at the local level. This initiative aimed to streamline data entry, registration, monitoring, and evaluation of vaccinations through an integrated system. The use of tablets facilitates more efficient processes by providing updated coverage data and guiding timely decision-making.

Understanding vaccination barriers, UNICEF also provided technical assistance to the *"Ponte al día"* national campaign through its *"Las vacunas salvan vidas"* campaign, which helped raise awareness on vaccines' life-saving quality and the importance of ensuring coverage for every child. This effort, particularly focused on hard-to-access urban communities, involved expanding vaccination coverage through the deployment of health promoters and vaccination teams for making home visits.

Additionally, the UNICEF-supported first National Mental Health Survey 2022, developed, revealed that 54.8% of the adolescent population (13-17 years old) experiences some form of anxiety disorder. The survey also found that 49% of children aged between 3 and 7 spend more than 7 hours on social networks. UNICEF will support the Government of El Salvador address these findings with the provision of mental health and psychological support for children and adolescents across sectors.

In the context of the implementation of the *"Ley Nacer con Cariño para un Parto Respetado y un Cuidado Cariñoso Sensible para el Recién Nacido,"* UNICEF helped consolidate a more inclusive model of comprehensive maternal and child health care, centered on the mother, the baby, and the family, through technical assistance for the development of guidelines for maternity hospitals. These guidelines, based on the UNICEF friendly services model, integrates elements of maternal and child health, child development care, and mental health. The guidelines have been implemented in all 40 maternity hospitals in the country, promoting an inclusive and family-centred approach, reaching around 80,000 children per year.

Through the implementation of the *"Ley Amor Convertido en Alimento para el Fomento, Protección y Apoyo a la Lactancia Materna,"* UNICEF helped equip and set up breastfeeding rooms in key institutions such as MINSAL, the National Health Institute (INS), FOSALUD, and the municipalities of Mejicanos and San Salvador. This initiative will extend to border areas to create welcoming spaces for nearly 800 mothers and their babies in workplaces and migration points.

In the Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) sector, UNICEF's work was instrumental in facilitating access to safe water for 21,157 individuals in humanitarian contexts through sustainable solutions. This ensures availability and accessibility of water for migrants and host communities, expanding the storage network, and providing materials for water treatment at the local level.

Sanitation services were upgraded for 7,721 people, with gender-specific, private, and well-lit facilities also accessible for people with disabilities. Additionally, UNICEF supported improvements to wastewater and grey water treatment facilities in three health centres, contributing to the reduction of fecal-oral diseases.

Regarding hygiene, UNICEF provided access to hand-washing facilities equipped with soap and water to 10,919 people. They also received supplies for personal hygiene and cleaning the facilities. Notably, this effort extended to 2,446 girls, adolescents, and women, who also received training on proper menstruation management.

These initiatives were part of the response to the migrant population, which helped enhance their access to WASH services across three rural health facilities, 14 schools, two shelters, and three land borders. UNICEF reached over 3,700 migrants through these efforts in partnership with the United States' Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (BPRM).

UNICEF also carried out assessments on the WASH FIT methodology at 17 health facilities. This revealed that their primary needs were associated with water availability and quality, as well as access to proper sanitation facilities with handwashing facilities. Improvement plans have been established and will be monitored throughout 2024.

UNICEF played a crucial role in supporting MINSAL in adapting the Climate Resilient Water Security Plans (CR-WSP) methodology. UNICEF introduced a user-friendly version and proposed technical guidelines for community operators to enhance the water quality that reaches 25% of the population. Additionally, UNICEF partnered with the Salvadoran Water Authority to adapt and disseminate the General Water Resources Law to over 200 local water operators nationwide. Collaborating with the Ministry of Education, UNICEF worked towards improving WASH indicators in schools by incorporating hand hygiene and menstrual hygiene indicators into measurement tools. This initiative aims to generate WASH data in schools, illustrating progress and identifying gaps in universal access to these services, which will inform planning and budgetary decisions going forward.

Taking a leadership role in the WASH sector, UNICEF played a vital role in enhancing preparedness and response capabilities by training 90 individuals from 26 institutions within the sector. Moreover, UNICEF advocated for the inclusion of a section outlining minimum WASH requirements in emergencies in the Manual for planning, putting together, and coordinating temporary shelters.

In collaboration with the National Civil Protection System, UNICEF delivered humanitarian aid to 727 individuals impacted by Tropical Storm Pilar. The assistance included the distribution of safe drinking water, family and menstrual hygiene kits, as well as 352 hygiene kits tailored for children under 2 years old.

The scientific evidence compiled by UNICEF on the advantages in learning, future job prospects, socio-emotional well-being, and social welfare associated with in-person school attendance played a crucial role in advocating for the complete return to in-person school attendance. This advocacy was conducted in collaboration with the Office of the First Lady and the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MINEDUCYT), aiming to ensure the right to inclusive, equitable, and quality education (SDG 4).

Furthermore, the "*Regreso a clases 2023*" campaign reached around 1,362,920 individuals through social networks and the web. This campaign, featuring testimonials from children, adolescents, parents, caregivers, and teachers, aimed to motivate the educational community to return to the classrooms safely. Moreover, UNICEF provided technical and financial support to strengthen MINEDUCYT's capacities to expand the provision of innovative, inclusive, multimodal, and quality educational opportunities for all children and adolescents, particularly those in vulnerable situations. This initiative aligned with and contributed to El Salvador's new educational model, known as "*Mi Nueva Escuela*." As part of the Protective Learning Environments (PLANE) programme, UNICEF implemented STEAM workshops (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) to strengthen the skills of 4,301 students (2,200 girls and 2,101 boys) and 154 teachers (85 men and 69 women) in these areas. The goal was also to foster interest in these careers, especially among girls, with the aim of reducing gender gaps in access to technical professions traditionally dominated by men. The effort included workshops for families to raise awareness and ensure support for students studying these fields.

Similarly, UNICEF also supported educational retention through the implementation of work initiation modules for 7th, 8th, and 9th grades during the regular school year, as well as technical diploma courses for regular high school programmes with flexible modalities. In total, these initiatives reached 2,934 adolescents and young people.

As a result of the second pilot of the Accelerated Education modality in a virtual format for basic education, UNICEF contributed to children's and adolescents' learning recovery, educational levelling, and psychosocial and psycho-pedagogical support. This enabled them to enrol, based on their age, in the 7th grade of the regular school year. UNICEF's technical assistance further facilitated the development of the Sustainability Plan for the Virtual Accelerated Education modality, ensuring its integration into the educational offerings provided by MINEDUCYT.

UNICEF implemented various measures to ensure educational continuity and support the learning recovery of 8,986 children and adolescents on the move identified in selected municipalities and

populations. These included distributing educational kits, developing educational reinforcement methodologies, providing equipment for play spaces, and enhancing 102 educational centres along the border. Additionally, UNICEF offered technical assistance and strengthened the Information System for the Management of Education in El Salvador (SIGES) within MINEDUCYT. This involved the creation and enhancement of digital tools for educational management, empowering school principals nationwide to make evidence-based decisions.

To foster protective learning and parenting environments, UNICEF supported the Government of El Salvador by encouraging the participation of 14,745 students in school committees across 40 schools.

Using the "I am also a person" methodology focused on promoting respectful parenting practices, 2,804 family caregivers received training, ultimately impacting 5,958 children and adolescents.

Recognizing online risks as well as children's increasing internet use and the mental health challenges associated with social media, UNICEF provided technical assistance facilitated to the design of an online safety course, engaging 1,297 children and adolescents, 135 teachers, and 154 family members. The course aimed to promote secure online learning spaces.

UNICEF enhanced the educational community's emergency preparedness and response capacity on for disaster risk reduction and climate change mitigation by updating two MINEDUCYT planning tools: the "Institutional Disaster Risk Management Plan", which contemplates the priority protocols on risk reduction in the educational sector, and the "Guide for the Preparation of the School Protection Plan, to prevent and/or reduce risks that affect comprehensive health, protection and safeguarding of the lives of the educational community, and mainly of the students."

These tools seek to reach all schools in the country with the aim to promote the culture of integral management in child-specific disaster risk reduction with a preventive approach.

In the protection sector, UNICEF played a vital role in ensuring the rights of children and adolescents under the State of Emergency. Through collaboration with an implementing partner, UNICEF provided medical and psychological assistance to adolescents in reintegration centres, including mental health sessions, medical assistance sessions, and sessions on sexual and reproductive health.

Furthermore, UNICEF collaborated with the Government of El Salvador to offer family foster care options within communities for children and adolescents whose parents and caregivers were detained under the State of Emergency and are now without parental care. Finding placement options for these children has proven to be challenging, which has led UNICEF and CONAPINA to partner around preventing institutionalization while also reaching out to children and adolescents who had suffered violence within institutional care settings.

At the local level, UNICEF remains committed to enhancing partnerships and cooperation with local governments and stakeholders to implement violence prevention strategies, including gender-based violence. This collaborative effort focuses on six municipalities with historically high violence, internal displacement, migration and adolescent pregnancy rates. The strategies for eradicating violence at the community level, supported by the David Beckham 7 Fund, gained increased importance in programming during 2023 to address the current state of emergency and its profound impact on children, providing valuable evidence for the incorporation of critical initiatives by the government, local authorities, and communities.

Children and their families were provided with psychosocial support services, including individual and family psychological care. The focus was on stabilizing emotions to cope with traumatic events, fostering the capacity for change, and enhancing resilience. Additionally, a life plan approach was implemented to strengthen community ties.

As a member of the United Nations Network on Migration, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the process of creating the human mobility policy and the comprehensive migration policy of the General Directorate for Migration and Foreign Affairs, with a view to ensuring a child focus to these policies.

Additionally, UNICEF evaluated the contribution of the "Learning and Parenting Protective Environments" project to broaden access to quality learning opportunities and foster comprehensive development in secure and supportive environments for girls, adolescents, and women in vulnerable situations. The evaluation highlighted several good practices, such as the adoption of a comprehensive and holistic approach engaging mothers, fathers, caregivers, teachers, and the community, enabling a

more accurate approach from various perspectives. The findings of this evaluation will be used to strengthen the implementation of the CO's Country Programme 2022-2026.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Inter-agency coordination remains crucial to support El Salvador in accelerating the achievement of the SDGs by 2030. In 2023, UNICEF collaborated with different agencies on five priority themes: immunization, eradication of femicide violence against women, eating habits for good family health and nutrition, consolidation of the national statistical system, and emergency preparedness and response.

In 2023, UNICEF participated in two joint programmes. The first was the "Spotlight Initiative," in collaboration with UN Women, UNFPA, and UNDP. Funded by the European Union, this initiative aimed to eradicate femicide, violence against women, adolescents, and girls. The second was "Global Promotion of Best Practices for Children in Migration (2020-2023) in Eastern and Southern Africa and Latin America and Caribbean Regions," in partnership with UNHCR. Funded by the European Union, focusing on ensuring the protection and fulfilment of the rights of children on the move, incorporating a gender approach, and integrating services. Both programmes have evidenced the United Nations System's added value in addressing multidimensional challenges and facilitated the exchange of successful experiences at national and international levels.

Furthermore, the work of the Humanitarian Country Team, where UNICEF takes the lead in nutrition, WASH, education, and child protection while co-leading the health sector, has enhanced humanitarian support to migrant populations and those impacted by climate-related events.

Additionally, UNICEF has redoubled its collaboration with WHO/PAHO and FAO to support the Government of El Salvador in extending the coverage of the National Immunization Plan with an equity focus. The partnership also seeks to increase the visibility of persistent challenges related to child malnutrition, with a particular emphasis on breastfeeding. The joint campaign "*Por familias más saludables*," implemented by the three agencies, garnered recognition from the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement as a good practice for promoting eating habits that enhance the health, nutrition, and well-being of families, positioning El Salvador as an international reference.

As part of the joint initiative of the United Nations System, UNICEF contributed to the design of a strategy to produce statistical information, presented to the Central Reserve Bank, to consolidate a national statistical system that provides inputs to guide public policy. The cornerstone of this proposal is the 2024 Population and Housing Census, which will update demographic and vital statistics that were last updated in 2007.

With support from the Government of Canada and in collaboration with PAHO/WHO, over 100 stakeholders from the National Integrated Health System, civil society organizations, municipalities, churches, and the media underwent training in social and behavioural change strategy (SBC). The aim was to build capacity to develop SBC strategies to promote vaccination with a gender approach. As a result of this session, UNICEF is working with the Ministry of Health to conduct research on parental immunization behaviours and practices in children and adolescents, as well as training with health personnel on Human Centred Design methods to build strategies to increase immunization in communities.

Within the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) in El Salvador, UNICEF, in its coordinating agency capacity, played a convening role to ensure the operational efficiency and active engagement of the Local Education Group (LEG). Including over 40 organizations representing civil society, academia, and international cooperation, the LEG serves as a platform for dialogue and discussions on education policies in El Salvador, with a particular focus on early childhood. Additionally, UNICEF monitors the implementation of funds provided by the GPE to the Government of El Salvador (amounting to US\$16.6 million made available to MINEDUCYT), which are complementary to the "Learning and Growing Together" loan financed by the World Bank. As a result of these efforts, El Salvador has a 2023-2030 Education Sector Plan, a roadmap to move towards a learning evaluation

system that serves to improve education in El Salvador with a gender focus, as well as the revised curriculum with recommendations for its strengthening, among others.

UNICEF further solidified its collaboration with the World Bank, enhancing the country's poverty analyses by incorporating a specific focus on children and adolescents in the design of the latest Poverty Assessment for El Salvador, scheduled for 2024. This partnership has facilitated advancements in developing a proposal to map child deprivations at the local level.

GAVI, along with the governments of Japan and Canada, are key partners in the implementation of the National Immunization Plan. Their contributions enabled the provision of essential resources and training for 70% of healthcare providers at the primary care level. The training covered crucial topics such as cold chain strengthening, ensuring safe vaccination practices, and staying updated on the immunization schedule. These partnerships also focused on training key stakeholders, including the National Integrated Health System, NGOs, civil society organizations, municipalities, faith-based actors, and the media, in executing strategies for social and behavioural change to promote immunization.

In the context of the PLANE Programme, the UNICEF partnership with the Government of Canada supported the implementation of strategies and methodologies to promote safe learning spaces for students, especially girls and adolescent women. It further supported the creation of spaces for the exchange of experiences and lessons learned with Honduras and Guatemala. As a result of this exchange, the Ministry of Education identified opportunities to improve its curriculum for flexible education modalities and to ensure educational continuity for adolescent and young mothers by providing care for their children while they study.

UNICEF initiated a South-South cooperation agreement with the UN-India Fund, securing USD 1,000,000 for the "Reading at Home" project. This initiative aims to distribute materials and encourage reading among 6,000 children aged 3-10 and their families in 2024.

In emergencies, partnerships with the U.S. Government, through BPRM, along with contributions from the European Union/Humanitarian Aid (ECHO), resulted in the delivery comprehensive humanitarian interventions for children, adolescents, and their families in transit through El Salvador. This support included psychosocial support, clothing, food, access to WASH services, as well as formal and non-formal education alternatives.

Innovation: UNICEF developed a strategy to collect community feedback, aiming to strengthen the relevance and pertinence in migration programming.

UNICEF designed a strategy to collect feedback from participants in UNICEF's response initiatives, clearly outlining the responsibilities of each staff member, particularly in humanitarian settings. This model has been embraced by other small offices in the region for its ability to tailor attention to the specific needs of these populations. Additionally, using a person-centred design methodology, UNICEF validated with a participative methodology, the design of a social and behavioural change strategy. This strategy focuses on collaborating with service providers in host communities and border areas, emphasizing access to information and services to ensure dignified human mobility that respects the rights of children, adolescents and families on the move.

Lesson learned: Maintaining children and adolescents at the core of the country's development model requires a sustained effort to engage with diverse public and private stakeholders, in an effort to design public policies that prioritize investments that foster successful life paths and sustain the gains achieved in early childhood.

In 2018, UNICEF formulated an evidence-based public policy proposal to draw attention to the significance of investing in children as a crucial foundation for the country's development. In a pre-electoral context, this initiative prompted all political parties to commit to increasing early childhood investment, incorporating it into their presidential proposals.

This commitment was embraced by the current administration, leading to tangible actions, including a rise in the budget allocated to early childhood (US\$179.96 million), the development of the "*Creceer Juntos*" Law, and the implementation of the "*Creceer Juntos*" Policy, among other initiatives.

Recognizing that early childhood is the foundation for shaping successful life paths, it is crucial for UNICEF to persist in its advocacy efforts, engaging with both public and private stakeholders to develop transformative and integrated public policies that reinforce the skills acquired in the early stages of life and enhance the return on investment in subsequent stages, with a particular emphasis on adolescence. During adolescence, a unique window of opportunity emerges to establish healthy social and behavioural patterns, access opportunities, and cultivate a sense of belonging that facilitates holistic development (UNICEF, 2018).

To address this need, UNICEF is designing an advocacy strategy that will enable establishing strategic alliances with both public and private stakeholders in 2024.