

## Nepal

### Update on the context and situation of children

In 2023, Nepal continued its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. During the year, 4,458,240 doses of COVID-19 vaccines were delivered in country through UNICEF support, which contributed to achieve cumulative coverage of 84 per cent full vaccination among the total population aged 12 years or above. Correspondingly, the national economy gradually recovered from the pandemic and the economic downturn triggered by recent global crises and conflicts, with an estimated and anticipated growth rate of 1.9 per cent and 4.3 per cent in fiscal year 2023/2024, respectively. The Recovery and Acceleration Learning Plan was adopted as a key strategy of the School Education Sector Plan and rolled out nationwide to facilitate recovery of learning losses from COVID-19 school closures. Eight years after the adoption of federalism, the Government of Nepal continuously worked towards the effective implementation of the federal constitution, aspiring to achieve a fair and inclusive decentralization process. Substantial strides were made in fiscal federalism. The country also stayed on track to graduate from the status of Least Developed Country by 2026, marking a crucial milestone in Nepal's journey towards sustainable development. Moreover, the country demonstrated significant advancement in meeting the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), with on-track progress noted in 42 per cent of the indicators. This contrasts with the global trend, where only 15 per cent of SDG indicators were estimated to be on track in 2023.

Notably, in August 2023, the National Planning Commission approved the Concept Paper of the 16th Five-year Periodic Plan, closely aligned with the Nepal Constitution, national and sectoral policies and the 15th Periodic Plan. The 16th Plan envisages 'good governance, social justice and prosperity' and aims to promote equity in health, education, employment and housing sectors, which impact the comprehensive wellbeing of children and women. In addition, with support from development partners, the government developed a Green, Resilient and Inclusive Development (GRID) Strategic Action Plan to guide Nepal's transition to a green, resilient, and inclusive economy for the next decade and beyond. The GRID approach involves a fundamental shift in managing risk and development - from a simple reactive response mode to a deliberate proactive recovery strategy for long-term green growth, climate action and sustainable development. This is particularly beneficial for children, as it lays the foundation for a more sustainable and secure future for the upcoming generation.

Nevertheless, on the political side, the 2022 general elections resulted in a hung parliament, with no single party or coalition securing a majority. This led to frequent changes in government leadership - both at federal and provincial levels as well as reshuffling of senior bureaucrats. This adversely impacted timely planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring of child welfare service delivery across the country. Nepal's young federalism continued to face governance challenges, including limited capacities at local government, delays in filling vacant positions, as well as an inadequate procurement and supply systems. This highlighted the need for further enhancement of the regulatory framework, institutional structure, human resource capacity and public finance management systems at the provincial and local levels.

Furthermore, economic challenges persisted with 21.8 per cent of children under 18 years of age being multidimensionally poor compared with 15.1 per cent of adults, approximately two-thirds of children deprived of at least one of seven basic needs, and around 1.1 million children engaged in child labour. Social sector allocations remained within the range of around 30 per cent of the total budget. Notably, there was a decline in budget allocation for health to 6 per cent in 2023 from 9 per cent in 2021. While social protection expenditures increased from 12 per cent in 2022 to 13 per cent of the total budget, approximately 20.1 million Nepalis remained without any form of social protection scheme in 2023. Nepal continued to be highly vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters. The humanitarian situation remained fragile in 2023, as Nepal experienced two major earthquakes in western Nepal, claiming 155 lives and affecting over 70,000 households. The annual monsoon season triggered disasters, impacting almost the entire country with 68 people dead and more than 6,000 households

affected. The earthquakes increased the risks of respiratory infections, asphyxia, dust inhalation, and exposure to the cold environment, causing hypothermia, especially in small infants. Damage to water supplies and sanitation facilities continued to pose a significant risk of waterborne disease outbreaks, while damage to health facilities and schools disrupted essential services. The loss of loved ones and traumatic events exposed children to poor mental health. This year also the country experienced a dengue outbreak with record-high number of 51,000 cases and 20 confirmed deaths.

Despite the steady progress in immunization coverage over the years, Nepal experienced measles outbreak in 2023 and an estimated 93,727 children were not immunized against childhood diseases (considered 'zero-dose'). While the country was recognized to be on track to meet the SDG target on stunting, the prevalence of child wasting, and anaemia remained high at 8 per cent and 43 per cent respectively. A notable 19 per cent of households still lacked access to safely managed drinking water, and about 5 per cent of the population reverted to open defecation. Child marriage remained a pervasive issue, particularly affecting girls in rural and marginalized areas due to cultural beliefs, poverty and limited educational opportunities. The Gender Gap Index score for Nepal fell from 0.692 in 2022 to 0.659 in 2023, dropping its rank from 96th to 116th, due to decline in performance on economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment and political empowerment for girls and women.

Birth registration rate was recorded at 74 per cent. An estimated 2.2 per cent of the population has some form of disability. Nearly 12 per cent of children had functional limitations, including stress and anxiety. Moreover, 34 per cent of children from government-funded early childhood education community schools had not attained readiness to learn on entry to grade. The rate of out-of-school adolescent girls remained as high as 37 per cent in some provinces.

## Major contributions and drivers of results

Despite the challenging programming context, UNICEF Nepal navigated through the year, working closely with all three levels of government and other partners to design, implement and monitor an integrated work plan aligned with the Country Programme planned results and national priorities. Notably, the Country Office's rolling management plan for 2023-24 outlined management priorities, results, and indicators to be achieved in six performance areas: quality assurance, financial management, people management, alliance building and partnerships, core values and workplace culture, and field office establishment and closure. Remarkable progress was made across all six performance areas, with effective key management strategies formulated and rolled out.

Quality assurance benchmarks were met, with two planned evaluations completed: one for RAHAT humanitarian cash transfer and the other for social security allowances. Implementation of agreed-upon actions from the evaluation management response is underway. The office maintained a 94 per cent emergency preparedness score, along with a 100 per cent compliance score in the Emergency Preparedness Platform. Risk analysis was conducted every six months, and an up-to-date emergency preparedness plan was available throughout the year, with no overdue contingency plans.

The 2023 targets for ethnic diversity were achieved, with a 2.4 per cent increase in the proportion of under-represented ethnic group and a 13.7 per cent decrease in the proportion of higher-class ethnic group. The target gender ratio was also met with 47 per cent female staff. However, the target for geographical diversity for international staff was not met, requiring further efforts in coming years. A total of 22 staff embarked on stretch assignments, staff exchange and surge missions. Moreover, 93 per cent of the staff completed the mandatory courses, with only 7 per cent of the general information security course outstanding.

Throughout the year, UNICEF Nepal made significant strides in promoting positive workplace culture, diversity, and inclusion. The action plan of 2022 Global Staff Survey was fully implemented, that enhanced staff engagement and adherence to UNICEF's ethics standards demonstrating the office's commitment to excellence and its dedication to improving the lives of children in Nepal.

On field office closure and establishment, continuous efforts were made to establish two field offices in Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces to strengthen advocacy and resource leveraging at provincial

and municipal levels.

Alongside the implementation of annual management priorities, tireless efforts were made across all sectors, cross-sectoral teams, and Operations with the following key results achieved for children in Nepal. The attained results were realized through effective cooperation involving all levels of government, partner organizations, donors, private sector and local communities.

### **Health**

In 2023, the Nepal Health Sector Strategic Plan 2023-2030 developed with UNICEF support was endorsed by the Cabinet. For seamless implementation of the strategic plan, UNICEF supported the development of supporting policy documents on maternal, newborn, and child health (MNCH), such as Every Newborn Action Plan and National Immunization Strategy.

UNICEF continued to support the government in modelling key MNCH interventions including the Kangaroo Mother Care guideline and skilled-birth attendance modular training package in three out of the seven provinces. UNICEF also strengthened the capacities of 123 emergency obstetric newborn care facilities and 2,125 health workers to provide quality MNCH services.

Notably, with UNICEF support, 281,233 children aged 9-11 months received measles and rubella (MR) vaccines, surpassing the target of 150,000 children in four priority provinces. The other three provinces, where UNICEF supported strengthening vaccine cold chain system, recorded 192,022 children aged 9-11 months immunized with MR vaccines. Furthermore, in response to a measles outbreak, an additional 1,589,419 children received MR vaccines through the Outbreak Response Immunization.

Efforts were continued to improve child and adolescent mental health by scaling up the innovative tele-mental health services, reaching 6,379 children and adolescents and introducing a socio emotional learning package in schools, reaching 8,579 children and adolescents. In addition, UNICEF supported the development of clinical protocol to effectively manage essential non-communicable diseases at first-level referral hospitals. To facilitate digital transformation in health services, 16 municipalities were supported with launching of their health dashboard system.

Following the earthquake in western Nepal, UNICEF ensured the continuity of essential health services in the affected areas through provision of 400 newborn incentive kits and 600 health kits, setting up of five medical tents and dissemination of health information materials.

### **Nutrition**

As a longstanding partner of the Government of Nepal on maternal, adolescent and child nutrition, UNICEF continued to provide lead technical support to the implementation of the National Multi-sector Nutrition Plan (MSNP) to reduce all forms of malnutrition. Our strong technical support to the Ministries of Health and Population (MoHP), Federal Affairs and General Administration (MoFAGA), and the National Planning Commission (NPC) resulted in enhanced government capacity for implementation, monitoring and assessment of the nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions under the MSNP.

UNICEF continued to advocate for enhanced leadership and accountability of local governments in improving nutrition for children, adolescents, and women. As a result, with UNICEF support, the MoFAGA initiated Nutrition Friendly Local Governance (NFLG) aimed at strengthening local government role and accountability in MSNP implementation, which was scaled up from 10 to 60 municipalities in 2023. In addition, with UNICEF advocacy and support, the NPC allocated \$4.29 million special grant to support nutrition action in 2023, compared with \$2 million allocated in 2022. Similarly, provincial and local governments allocated \$3.09 million and \$1.29 million, respectively to support the implementation of MSNP.

To reduce child wasting and improve early initiation of breastfeeding, Integrated Management of Acute Malnutrition (IMAM) and Mother-Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (MBFHI) were scale-up and institutionalized. Specifically, with UNICEF support, more than 1,000 outpatient therapeutic centers and five nutrition rehabilitation centers were established, which contributed to the increase in the number of severely wasted children treated from 29,806 in 2022 to 36,224 in 2023. Moreover, the number of MBFHI hospitals increased from 25 in 2022 to 52 in 2023, with 90 per cent of babies born in these hospitals breastfed within one hour of birth.

Furthermore, a breakthrough was achieved for children, with the Government of Nepal, with UNICEF

support, revising the National Breastmilk Substitute Act for the first time since it was introduced 33 years ago. The act is now with the national cabinet for final approval. The government also approved a 6-month paid maternity leave policy for mothers in public offices to promote exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life.

### **Climate-resilient WASH**

UNICEF continued to strengthen WASH sector governance at all levels through facilitation of the endorsement of the WASH policy, finalization of WASH regulation and drafting of WASH Acts in Koshi, Bagmati, Lumbini and Sudurpaschim provinces. The development of local WASH plans was initiated in 483 municipalities, of which 92 completed the plans in 2023 with UNICEF support. Notably, following consultation workshops in all seven provinces, the long-awaited national Joint Sector Review was carried out, resulting in a 20-point declaration to be implemented and monitored in coming years. UNICEF also supported the government in conducting WASH Bottleneck analysis and further development of a climate rationale, providing a set of agreed and costed actions to help WASH infrastructure and services to be more sustainable and resilient to climate-related risks.

In 2023, with UNICEF support, 19,462 people (9,672 women) in eight municipalities benefited from basic drinking water services through the construction of 16 water supply systems, and 74,922 people (37,234 women) in ten municipalities benefited from safely managed water supply services. A total of 1,400 people (717 women) received basic sanitation services, and 72 schools received basic WASH facilities, benefiting 27,811 students (14,700 girls) from 21 municipalities. Furthermore, UNICEF provided basic WASH facilities including safe disposal of waste in 17 healthcare facilities, benefiting 29,750 people (15,172 women) in nine municipalities.

In response to floods, landslides and earthquakes in the country, UNICEF reached 52,150 people (25,885 women) and 18,774 children with water supplies and 22,267 people (including 11,369 women) and 7,748 children with adequate sanitation services.

### **Education**

In 2023, with UNICEF support, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) developed several policies and frameworks to improve the quality of education and define minimum enabling conditions for learning. This includes the REAL plan, child-friendly schools implementation package, a common package for education service delivery to support decentralization of education services and key diagnostic tools and resources for teachers to assess learning losses in students and plan targeted interventions to help learning recovery. Through UNICEF supported programming, nearly 11,000 children (40 per cent girls) directly benefited from these learning recovery initiatives this year.

Following the launch of the new 2023-30 School Education Sector Plan (SESP) last year, UNICEF extended its role of development partner focal point and continued to support federal, provincial, and local governments in ensuring adequate institutional capacity to implement the plan. In total, 150 municipalities were supported to localize the SESP strategies and targets, of which, 82 municipalities developed and endorsed their local education sector plans and budgets, exceeding the UNSDCF target of 60 municipalities.

UNICEF also made a breakthrough in parenting education by mobilizing the private sector for the expansion of a national parenting education package. A total of 54 organizations were briefed on the package and 89 national trainers in the private sector were trained. A national Teacher Professional Development package incorporating the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS)-based formative assessment was finalized. Around 20,000 children benefited from integrated early childhood development (ECD) and ELDS report card initiatives.

Girls and Inclusive Education Networks (GIEN) were established, and gender focal points appointed in 80 municipalities in the country's three most marginalized provinces. UNICEF also supported 22 municipalities to institutionalize the Student Assessment Technical Committee, resulting in vision and hearing assessments of 32,586 (18,000 girls) early-grade children. As a result, 1,980 children were diagnosed with vision and hearing problems, with 459 receiving glasses and others supported in accessing assistive devices.

To strengthen non-formal education (NFE) for out-of-school children, UNICEF supported the development of NFE national curriculum framework and relevant implementation guideline and

equivalency testing system. With UNICEF support, 20 municipalities provided learning opportunities for 3,803 out-of-school adolescent girls through the Supporting Adolescents Girls Education (SAGE) programme, which has helped over 35,000 girls go back to school in the last few years. Following the earthquake in western Nepal, UNICEF ensured learning continuity in safe and protected environments for more than 17,000 (51 per cent girls) children, through provision of learning materials and supplies as well as establishment of more than 220 temporary learning centres. UNICEF continued to support the government in scaling up the Comprehensive School Safety Minimum Package to more than 500 schools across the country and worked with cluster partners to scale up coverage ensuring more than 25 per cent coverage (around 8,000 schools).

### **Child Protection**

With UNICEF support, significant progress was made this year in strengthening national legislation and policies related to child protection, through alignment with international human rights standards. Key achievements include the formulation of a Mandatory Reporting Guideline on Violence Against Children, an Integrated Child Protection Procedure, and a Best Interest Determination Guideline. As a result, the service providers, including those from education and health sectors, had access to standard tools for equipping them with knowledge and skills to effectively report cases related to violence, abuse and exploitation against children.

These measures aim to ensure the reporting of and effective response to incidents of violence, abuse, and exploitation against children. UNICEF also supported the publication of annual fact sheets on gender-based violence, suicide and cybercrime by the Women, Children, and Senior Citizens Directorate of Nepal Police.

A crucial role was played by UNICEF in the digital transformation of the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) system, fostering interoperability between relevant offices. Moreover, the global Child Protection Information Management (CPIMS+) was adapted to the Nepali context and began to be rolled out in 18 government helplines, four hotlines and 27 temporary shelters. The CPIMS+ serves as a centralized platform to enhance case management and ensures comprehensive service delivery for the victims, survivors, and their families.

In partnership with provincial and local governments, UNICEF strengthened the capacity of 3,500 service providers to deliver child-friendly and gender-sensitive services. As a result, approximately 78,000 children and women at risk or survivors of violence were provided with psychosocial support, multi-sectoral gender-based violence prevention, mitigation and response services, birth registration and legal assistance including in humanitarian settings.

Furthermore, with UNICEF support, the Rupantaran programme (holistic adolescent development social and financial skills package) empowered thousands of girls and boys with social and financial skills, with the aim of preventing violence, child marriage, child labour and sexual abuse. The success of the programme led to its adaptation into an e-learning app, with the potential to reach a broader audience nationwide. Over 25,000 children, adolescents, parents and caregivers and community leaders' capacities were enhanced through systematic engagement and investment to demand equitable laws and policies and gender-responsive services that prevent violence, abuse, exploitation and harmful practices.

UNICEF's involvement in the development of contingency plans at federal and provincial levels proved to be instrumental during the earthquake in western Nepal. Within a short aftermath of the earthquake, psychosocial support was provided to 1,986 individuals and 15 child-friendly spaces were established benefiting 781 children (412 girls and 369 boys).

### **Social Protection, Governance and Evidence (SPGE)**

In 2023, the long-awaited National Social Protection Strategy developed with UNICEF support was endorsed by the Cabinet. The strengthened partnership with the Ministry of Finance and its Economic Lab laid the foundation for a series of policy papers focusing on the impact of inflation on the most vulnerable population groups as well as social protection financing focusing on child grant. In addition, after a year of persistent advocacy by UNICEF, the NPC agreed to conduct an evaluation of the country's portfolio of non-contributory social protection programmes.

An innovative disability screening online app was successfully piloted this year in 10 municipalities, enabling 400 people with disabilities to be included in the social protection system. Notably, the

Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizen agreed to scale up the use of this app in coming years with UNICEF support.

With UNICEF support, Dhangadi Municipality adopted a policy and guideline on citizen's participation in budget process, encouraging government accountability and transparency in budget formulation, funds allocation and distribution and effective management of public resources. This is now being adopted in four other major cities. Furthermore, in 2023, UNICEF partnered with MoFAGA to revise the indicators and strategy for child-friendly local governance (CFLG) and continued to strengthen CFLG in 22 municipalities. Over 30,000 children were mobilized and oriented on child rights through Bal Bhela (Children's Assembly) in partnership with the European Union, civil society partner Mitra Samaj and local governments.

### **Programme Effectiveness**

In 2023, UNICEF supported the Government of Nepal's multi-hazard response, providing life-saving supplies and interventions to around 52,190 people (17,514 women), including 17,880 children (9,082 girls). A series of capacity-building initiatives were rolled out throughout the year, targeting 190 staff and partners on emergency preparedness and response (EPR), disaster risk reduction (DRR), UNICEF's core commitments for children and accountability to affected population. Similarly, capacities of 2,891 people (1,474 women) in 18 municipalities were enhanced on DRR, EPR, and climate, energy and environment for effective risk management.

UNICEF, in collaboration with the Family Welfare Division and Nepal Red Cross Society, developed and implemented social behaviour change interventions to reach over 1.5 million children during a measles outbreak response in nine districts. A comprehensive door-to-door campaign and school orientation promoting positive health behaviours and awareness on child rights issues reached 11,892 individuals in Sudurpaschim and Karnali provinces.

UNICEF demonstrated effective crisis communication in the aftermath of the earthquake in western Nepal by swiftly disseminating information through various channels for both communication and fundraising purposes. The efforts coupled with rapid media training of key spokespersons in the office helped garner 61 international media mentions of its earthquake response. UNICEF facilitated youth involvement in advocacy – particularly through the Youth Advocates programme and engagement of volunteers – in various national and global workshops and consultations, as well as opportunities to co-create content to be disseminated through digital channels. Multimedia content addressing mental health, post-COVID learning recovery and disaster response led to a 13 per cent increase in digital supporters, reaching 17.9 million individuals with over 88 million engagements. The year also involved in-person staff capacity-building on key advocacy themes and proactive media engagement, resulting in a total of 317 media mentions highlighting UNICEF's commitment to children's rights. UNICEF also hosted over half a dozen high-level visits to showcase and garner support for our efforts and initiatives to advancing child rights on the ground.

## **UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships**

UNICEF continued to engage with a diverse range of stakeholders, including federal, provincial, and local governments, international and national civil society organizations (CSO), academic institutions, private sector companies and networks and UN agencies. With these multi-faceted partnerships, UNICEF aimed at maximizing results and resources for the well-being of children, adolescents, and women in Nepal.

In 2023, a total of 95 partnerships were established with various government entities at the federal, provincial, and local levels. These partnerships were instrumental in ensuring seamless execution of planned interventions across all three levels of government. Specifically, UNICEF's sustained collaboration with key ministries, including the Ministries of Health and Population; Education, Science and Technology; Water Supply; Finance; Federal Affairs and General Administration; and the National Planning Commission, remained pivotal in strengthening policy and legislative

environment as well as sectoral governance for the benefit of children in the current federal context.

Importantly, new partnerships were initiated in 2023 with the Ministries of Forests and Environment; Water Resources and Irrigation; and the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority, to bolster climate and disaster risk reduction efforts in Nepal. Furthermore, strategic alliances were forged with provincial ministries and local governments to facilitate service delivery for children in selected municipalities. Specifically, the partnership with municipal associations was useful for improving WASH sector governance at the local level through enhancement in knowledge, skills, capacities, and resources of 70 municipalities.

In 2023, UNICEF partnered with 48 national and international CSOs. Notably, the partnership with international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) focused on areas where their specialized expertise could bring synergy to UNICEF's system strengthening efforts. This includes collaboration with the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) to support the Nepal Government on WASH bottleneck analysis and development of a climate rationale as well as collaboration with the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health to strengthen pediatric and newborn care. Concurrently, there was a heightened emphasis on partnering with local NGOs for implementing initiatives at the local level. For instance, the partnership with RAHAT Nepal was the first of its kind to implement blockchain-based cash transfer innovation in Jaleswor Municipality of Madhesh Province. Our continued engagement with national and international NGOs proved indispensable for the timely implementation of the agreed workplan.

Six new partnerships with private sector companies helped UNICEF leverage business platforms to effectively raise awareness of children's issues and mobilize participation of business sector in various child rights issues including parenting education, business and community resilience, family-friendly policies, nutrition, immunization, and mental health. UNICEF also engaged with the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FNCCI) for the Small and Medium Enterprise Summit, which provided a platform to raise awareness on child rights and business principles among more than 300 stakeholders including the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. Moreover, in collaboration with the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security, a consultation was held on children's rights under the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights.

As for collaboration with other UN agencies, UNICEF served as the administrative agency of a groundbreaking Government-EU-UN joint programme, named "Empowered Women, Prosperous Nepal." The joint programme is implemented by four UN agencies (UNICEF, UNFPA, UN Women and ILO) in close collaboration with the Government of Nepal and aims at advancing gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in Nepal. Furthermore, UNICEF, in collaboration with UNDP and UNWOMEN continued to implement an urban earthquake preparedness programme in four municipalities in the provinces of Lumbini, Karnali and Sudurpaschim in coordination with federal, provincial, and local government. A UNICEF-UNFPA partnership to end child marriage in Nepal also continued this year.

Partnerships with donors and particularly UNICEF National Committees to showcase UNICEF's work in Nepal and mobilize resources continued this year through the production of high-quality emotive content and a half-dozen visits (in-person and virtual). These included visits from donors and National Committees from Finland, the USA and the UK, as well as a high-level visit by the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships and an international mission to gather content from the Global Partnership for Education.

UNICEF continued to co-lead four humanitarian clusters including education, WASH, nutrition, and child protection. UNICEF also led the Social Protection Task Team and Cash Coordination Working Group and co-chaired the Human Capital Development Outcome of the UNSDCF, the UN Youth

Group, UN Communication Group, Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) working groups. UNICEF continued to serve as an active member of UN joint working groups such as Gender in Humanitarian Action (GIHA), UN Procurement Working Group, Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), UN domestic violence, gender-based violence (GBV) in emergency, fostering common understanding and effective collaboration on a range of issues.

UNICEF continued in its role as a co-financing development partner under the education Sector Wide Approach (SWAp) arrangements and a lead on coordinating development partner technical assistance as part of its support in the implementation of the Global Partnership for Education. UNICEF also continued to be an active member of health development partners SWAp aiming at mainstreaming major child-related issues in health and contributing to the strengthening of health systems for universal health coverage.

## Lessons Learned and Innovations

UNICEF Nepal's successful implementation of digital and data-driven innovations helped to significantly improve service delivery for children. These innovations include the national scale-up and adoption of the Child Protection Information Management System through helplines, Early Childhood Education and Development online portal, Education Management Information System, Protection Monitoring and Incident Reporting System, an online disability screening app and a blockchain-based cash transfer system. All these innovations strengthened evidence-based decision-making for social services for children. Notably, the blockchain-based cash transfer system introduced a new level of transparency and efficiency by enabling real-time tracking of transfers and bank reconciliation through QR codes. These advances underscore the potential of such innovations to bring about impactful change in children's lives and serve as valuable lessons for future initiatives. They highlight the importance of using technology to improve transparency, efficiency and evidence-based decision-making in service delivery.

The introduction of digital tele-mental health, using chatbot platform, improved the coverage and quality of relevant counselling services. Despite challenges related to technical expertise and data privacy and protection, the application of artificial intelligence in mental health services showed promising results, particularly in reaching the unreached in geographically isolated regions.

The multi-level collaboration with national and sub-national government agencies was instrumental in ensuring the successful introduction, piloting, long-term sustainability, and national scale up of these innovations. The combination of these factors - the innovative strategies, the collaborative approach with the government and the commitment to sustain and scale up - all contributed to a compelling case for the sustainability of these efforts.

UNICEF improved the effectiveness of its programmes by integrating cross-sectoral social and behaviour change (SBC) interventions. These interventions facilitated long-lasting and impactful transformations within communities. The SBC efforts utilized behavioral insights and incorporated gender-sensitive and equity-focused approaches, effectively enhancing the government's capacities. Engagement with community stakeholders (religious leaders, decision-makers, parents, and young people) led to an increase in immunization uptake, supported a safe return to school after disasters, protected children from sexual exploitation and abuse, prevented child marriage, promoted positive parenting, and advocated for climate action. Throughout the programme implementation, it was realized that the meaningful engagement with key stakeholders is very important in retaining their support, particularly when facing opposition from other actors and denouncing harmful and discriminatory practices.

In addition, UNICEF's effective use of social listening was instrumental in understanding community perceptions on child rights. This approach enabled UNICEF to detect and debunk hoaxes and misinformation across child rights priorities, thereby ensuring the accuracy and reliability of information. Furthermore, it empowered communities by enhancing their understanding of the



importance of digital literacy. This experience underscores the value of social listening as a tool for both gathering insights and fostering digital literacy within communities.

Nepal's young federalism continued to face governance challenges, including limited local government capacities, frequent staff turnover and an inadequate procurement system. The persistent human resource gap, with all tiers of government struggling to fill sanctioned posts, directly impacted timely delivery and the quality of services. In response to these challenges, UNICEF continued to support the capacity-building of government officials. Moving forward, UNICEF plans to accelerate efforts to strengthen Nepal's child-friendly governance by enhancing the capacities of local and provincial government leadership and management for evidence-based planning, public finance management and quality social service delivery and monitoring for children.

Furthermore, Nepal's high vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters posed a continuous threat to its progress in human development and poverty reduction. This underscores the need to prioritize the integration of environmental sustainability and climate action into all sector programmes and operations. It also highlights the importance of enhancing the capacities of young people and the government in child-centered climate adaptation, mitigation and disaster risk reduction. These lessons are crucial for ensuring the resilience and sustainable development of the country in the face of environmental challenges.