Africa’s second most populous country is gripped by an enduring polycrisis and the collapse of many key systems. Armed conflict and intercommunal violence, climate hazards, disease outbreaks, acute food insecurity, refugee influxes, and high inflation are all contributing to large-scale population displacements, and continue to cause a complex and protracted humanitarian crisis. The result is multiple violations of children’s rights, including increases in sexual violence and child marriages. From the rugged mountains to the dry lowland plains, 21.4 million people, including 10.8 million children, require humanitarian assistance.

It is against this backdrop that UNICEF has consistently deployed Core Resources (RR) in times of peace and leveraged other resources during the conflict to build and sustain the social services sector in Ethiopia.

Why this sector? Because in Ethiopia, just as across the world, social service workers operate at the very heart of society, weaving the vital connections that link children and their families with essential health care, education, child protection, and other services. We work in two main ways: first, directly funding the deployment of 1,200 (15 per cent) of the country’s 8,000 social service workers to development and humanitarian settings; and second, strengthening the entire social services system through pre-service and in-service training to help children at scale. As a result, we have been able to provide children with services protecting them from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect, and other harmful practices, while also providing them with access to care, mental health, and justice.
Social workers: Meeting the needs of children, whatever they are, from the heart of the community

The positive impact that access to social services has on children means that just one social service worker, working across silos and following the best interests of the child, can power progress towards multiple SDG goals. For example, Fatuma Ali, a dedicated UNICEF-supported social service worker in the Nesim Shekila subdistrict, was able to prevent 8th Grade student Fatuma Seid from being forced into an arranged marriage by connecting her to a comprehensive care and support programme that has enabled her to continue her education and have access to essential provisions.

“Thanks to my school principal, the social worker Fatuma Ali, and the committee that convinced my mother to cancel the arranged marriage, I am now free to pursue my education,” declared a grateful Fatuma. This one act ripples across five of the SDGs, and in 2023 it was repeated across the country as social service workers cancelled over 3,700 child marriages and supported those girls to experience a happier and more rewarding future.

I want to tell the story of one nine-year-old child. When I first met her, I noticed that she behaved strangely. She was isolated and had been suspended from school. Her home was not a safe environment due to substance use in the family. We assessed her situation and prioritized the protection concerns. It took time, but we persuaded her parents to seek medical help – they had no idea she was suffering from a mental disorder as mental health awareness is very low in the community. The child was assessed by a psychologist and a psychiatrist. The mental health team then prepared a treatment plan, including for the parents. Since we first met, the family’s situation has significantly changed. The parents have stopped their substance use and moved on to a new life, and the child’s condition has slowly improved. While we focused on her medical follow up, we also reintegrated her back to school and into the community.

There’s great satisfaction that comes from being an agent of change and improvement in people’s lives. I believe this is the reason I live.”
Knowing that I have rights is so empowering

Tirik Dulane, a displaced Somali woman, received UNICEF-supported child protection training and was offered a job as a community service worker by UNICEF’s partner, the local district’s Women, Children, and Social Affairs Office. Her role includes facilitation of community conversations and girls’ empowerment activities, including discussions on ending early marriage and female genital mutilation.

For Tirik the most fulfilling experience in her newfound career is to see children and women protected from violence, abuse, and exploitation.

“The knowledge and experience I gained has helped me improve my personal life as well,” says Tirik. “Knowing that I have rights is so empowering. I didn’t know this before I became a community service worker. I didn’t know about the negative consequences of child marriage, or about female genital mutilation. I had our oldest daughter cut, but my two younger girls are not cut because I now know that it is a violation of their rights.”

“My husband used to save money in his own bank account. We now have a joint account for the last four years. We openly discuss our finances. My job has taught me skills to be emotionally connected to my family. I understand my children better and can sense when they need psychological and emotional support. Being a community service worker has made me more apt in my approach to children, including my own.”

Tirik is one of the 96 community service workers, usually members of the community or affected populations, deployed with UNICEF support and now transforming lives in the Somali region.

Through RR, UNICEF Ethiopia has built a national social services sector where there was almost none before, and has sustainably developed it in a way that benefits children and families, ensuring that the social service workforce is embedded in the national social protection, health, and justice sectors. With UNICEF support from RR and other resources, these professionals are also being trained and deployed to humanitarian hotspots; and specialized teams consisting of both social workers and psychologists have been deployed in crisis zones, helping to ensure that we reach the most vulnerable children wherever they are – in times of peace and in times of insecurity.

We have also ensured equity by building the capacity of social service workers to identify and support at-risk and vulnerable children. And we have ensured high-quality care by developing standards to harmonize the quality of service delivery across the country, as well as by building a case management system to register and track the response and resolution of child protection cases. Critically, these efforts are supporting a sustainable, professional sector, both now and into the future.

“Social service workers in Ethiopia play a crucial role in providing access to vital services that significantly affect the daily lives of children,” notes Dr. Aboubacar Kampo, UNICEF Representative in Ethiopia. “Thanks to the predictability of RR funding over several years, the workforce has been able to grow and establish itself, ensuring continuity and reliability in service provision. Regardless of whether it is in a development or a humanitarian context, we can be there to support women and children no matter where they are.”
Ensuring child survival is at the very heart of UNICEF’s work. Measured by the under-five mortality rate, progress against this vital metric is quite simply a matter of life and death. Indeed, it is of such importance that it has its own dedicated indicator within the Sustainable Development Goals – SDG 3.2.1.

Over the past 20 years the number of Cambodian children dying under the age of 5 has plummeted by 75 per cent, such that SDG 3.2.1 has now been met in Cambodia! While UNICEF continues to work to reduce the rate even further, it is important to celebrate the hard work of many people and partners, as well as all those who have supported UNICEF with RR. This grand achievement is yours, too.

Reaching this historic position has been the result of many factors, including an improvement in Cambodia’s economic outlook and infrastructure. But there is one cause, underlying all else, that must be singled out and celebrated: consistency. UNICEF has been striving on behalf of Cambodia’s children since our county office opened in 1973, building strong and trusted relationships with the government, our many partners, and with communities. And when it comes to child survival, our expert staff have been working in and across multiple sectors – including health, nutrition, Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), and social protection – to address the immediate, underlying, and root causes of this crucial issue.

RR, with its predictable and flexible nature, has been the bedrock of this work over many years. It has enabled us to work tirelessly in areas that are vital to realize long-term change, such as technical expertise, evidence generation, systems strengthening, innovation, and convening support. The fact that our experts can deploy RR wherever it will have the greatest impact enables us to work for both immediate and long-term results. For example, in the area of children’s health, we have strengthened the capacity of skilled birth attendants and midwives, improving the quality of both antenatal and postnatal care. In the area of nutrition, we have used RR to locally produce Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food, which is lower in cost, enabling more children to be treated for acute malnutrition. And in the area of immunization, RR has supported outreach to the most remote areas with vaccines and other health services to ensure no child is left behind on receiving lifesaving interventions.

Importantly, RR also enables us to identify risks in today’s world of climate change, such as through environmental health assessments that identify the most pressing climate and health threats to children, so we can act now to safeguard our hard-won wins.

All of us at UNICEF are deeply grateful for the generous funding that has supported such remarkable results in Cambodia. Taken together, with RR at the centre, we have been able to implement a system-wide ‘whole child’ approach towards caring for children. As a result, and with your continued support, we can do more than just help children survive – we can help them to thrive and reach their full potential.

* Based on UN global estimates. According to the Cambodia Demographic Health Survey 2021–2022 under-five mortality is 16 deaths per 1,000 live births.
Core Resources powers extraordinary success for children in Montenegro

- How do you reach almost every child in a country and not only alleviate their poverty but provide a better future through education, health care, and increased resilience?

- How do you make the alleviation of child poverty a national issue and then channel that momentum to strengthen an entire social protection system for children and their families?

- How do you turn a $200,000 UNICEF investment into a $48 million per year government investment – for an incredible 240X return?

- For UNICEF in Montenegro, the answer is commitment, persistence, and core resources.

Poverty has had a long and debilitating effect on the children of Montenegro, with an array of interlinked factors causing the poverty rate to remain stubbornly above 30 per cent since records began in 2013. The various consequences of poverty overlap, creating a series of obstacles that affect all aspects of children’s lives and preventing them from fulfilling their rights to education, health care, protection, and more.

In 2020, however, a possible shift in the political landscape opened up a rare opportunity for effecting change by making child poverty reduction a national issue. This is absolutely crucial, because UNICEF cannot sustainably improve the lives of children without also addressing the key issue of child poverty. With parliamentary elections looming, the Montenegro country office rapidly used available RR funding to recruit new expert staff in social policy, as well as in communications, to mobilize the support needed to meet this ambitious goal.

Even pre-pandemic, the national child poverty rate was a staggering 32 per cent. To support the case for change, UNICEF used unrestricted RR funds to carry out a comprehensive study into poverty. The study showed that child poverty was widespread and multidimensional: more than 80 per cent of Montenegrin children of all ages experience deprivation in at least one aspect of their lives, with younger children’s lives tending to be affected in even more areas. These findings bolstered the case for a solution that was universal in its approach.

Working with young people, UNICEF helped secure cross-party backing for the idea of expanding the country’s previous scheme – which covered only 10 per cent of Montenegro’s children – with one that would help all children from childhood to adolescence by addressing the cross-cutting consequences of multidimensional poverty.
The next step was to turn the momentum into a concrete outcome. To do this, RR was once again the vital resource when UNICEF, together with the World Bank, provided an in-depth assessment of various cash transfer programme options to reduce child poverty. Our coordinated campaign influenced annual allocations from the national budget, in the end leveraging an extraordinary $48 million annually to fund a universal child allowance. Bottom line, all funds come from the government, with no donor contributions needed. That represents a 240X return on UNICEF’s $200,000 RR investment!

Specifically, the new allowance provides a $32 monthly cash transfer to all children 0–18 years, with additional funds for children with disabilities or who are on social assistance. This cash not only addresses the root causes of all the interlinked challenges of multidimensional poverty but the benefits ripple out further. Our experts designed the scheme so that children and their families would be connected with social welfare officers who can offer broader support in cases of violence or other child protection issues. And by collecting the allowance in post offices, there is close monitoring and targeting, and the system is also better prepared to deliver cash in emergencies.

The results have been astounding. The allowance reaches 97–98 per cent of all children in the country. And the child poverty rate has already fallen below the historic 30 per cent level to 28.4 per cent – something that seemed impossible for decades. UNICEF calculations estimate that the allowance will result in a 6.7 per cent decrease in children at risk of poverty. In addition, based on evidence from middle-income contexts, UNICEF estimates that every $1 invested in cash transfers generates about $10 in value to the Montenegro economy.

Without the reliability and flexibility of RR, we would not have been able to seize the sudden opportunity to make child poverty a national issue in Montenegro. Nor would we have been able to generate the essential data needed to turn an idea into reality. In short, RR enables UNICEF offices around the world to use their expertise and relationships to capitalize on opportunities as they arise and to turn them into incredible outcomes for children and their national economies.
Microfinance for macro-impact in West Africa

If you had to name an item that can bring dignity to all, help children grow up healthy, protect women and girls from gender-based violence, create local businesses and develop local economies, even contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals, would you think of the toilet? In three countries in the West and Central Africa region, UNICEF has been using RR to pioneer an innovative sanitation solution that is transforming lives. Because open defecation contributes to disease outbreaks, malnutrition, and preventable diarrheal deaths in young children, when we address this challenge we can accelerate progress on multiple SDGs, including poverty, nutrition, health, education, and inequality. Indeed, 3.5 billion people globally lack safely managed sanitation, and more than 10 per cent of these people live in West Africa. This is why making a difference in terms of safe sanitation in West Africa also makes a difference to the world.

The story of this innovation began when UNICEF discovered – using RR-supported research – that the approaches traditionally used to trigger a change in behaviour were insufficient to achieve a sustainable impact in ending open defecation in the region. The problem was fourfold:

- First, once people were aware of the need for proper sanitation, only a small proportion had the readily available means to construct durable toilets that can withstand climate events.
- Second, with public toilets charging for use and sometimes unsafe at night, the return to open defecation was often the only option remaining.
- Third, although research showed that close to half of the people affected were willing to construct their own toilet, they lacked the upfront cash to do so.
- Finally, funding available from the state and donors was limited.

In the face of these challenges, UNICEF and partners made the case for market-based financial solutions to play a key role in providing sanitation. Indeed, globally, sanitation has a cost-benefit ratio of $1 to $5.5, and studies confirm that providing a credit or loan facility can drive demand for sanitation products.

In response, UNICEF turned to the Strategic and Innovative Activities Fund, set aside annually for allocation by the Executive Director, to expand an innovative finance mechanism in Ghana, Togo, and Nigeria: specifically, ‘revolving sanitation funds’ schemes. Working in partnership with governments, banks, and microfinance institutions, the schemes provide affordable loans to construct toilets, which are then re-paid and re-loaned, hence their ‘revolving’ nature.

Since its launch, the funds in the scheme have ‘revolved’ several times. Loans have been made across the three countries, and families are enjoying the benefits of their own secure sanitation.
many for the very first time. Families have also saved money by no longer needing to pay to use public toilets. The funds are distributed as vouchers, which minimizes the risk of misuse. At the same time as the loans, UNICEF uses RR to train micro, small, and medium enterprises to construct climate-resilient toilets and to market sanitation more effectively, which has created new job opportunities.

As Hajiya Hadiza Mohammed, a business owner, notes, “I must say that sanitation is one of the greatest businesses you can venture into and be successful in Nigeria today.” UNICEF also helps to create demand for sanitation through interventions that pitch toilets as a smart investment with positive health and economic returns for families and communities. Women in particular, who were previously at a higher risk of contracting infections and of security-related issues due to open defecation, have benefitted from the quality-of-life improvements brought about by availing themselves to these microfinance loans.

Thanks to RR, in addition to funding this innovative finance scheme, UNICEF has retained the ability to operate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) programmes across countries and to focus on where the need is greatest. With donor priorities in some countries shifting away from WASH, RR has allowed UNICEF to retain its vital expertise, often leaving it a country’s only development partner with community-level WASH programmes. This continuity is essential to ensuring that children and their families gain and retain access to crucial WASH services, and to ensuring that these countries remain on track to meet their SDGs.

### Ghana
With RR and other resources, over 2,700 toilets have been constructed, benefitting over 16,000 people. Following the successful demonstration with RR, UNICEF catalysed funding from the Government of the Netherlands to scale up the Ghana Sanitation Fund nationally. In an exciting development, as of 2024 the fund will be managed independently from both UNICEF and the Government of Ghana. This is because UNICEF secured an additional $3 million in earmarked funding from partners, for the fund to multiply itself, and it will continue to support its growth through fintech innovation and other improvements.

### Nigeria
With RR and other funding, over 289,000 toilets have been constructed or improved, benefitting 2.78 million people. The Government of Nigeria invests its own resources to match the loans – instantly doubling the reach of the scheme and making more efficient use of scarce government funding. A pilot initiative is also ongoing to provide the most vulnerable populations, such as the poorest households and pregnant women, with grants to construct toilets. There is a high level of ownership and commitment to take over the management of the model in the future. Women, young entrepreneurs, and start-ups are actively involved in the scheme, collaborating with and growing Nigeria’s sanitation market.

### Togo
With RR and other funding, nearly 5,000 toilets were constructed or improved, benefitting some 44,700 people. The scheme is still nascent in Togo, currently covering 15 per cent of municipalities, including those with the most vulnerable populations. However, UNICEF has secured an additional $5 million in earmarked funding to be used from 2024. There is a high level of ownership by the Government of Togo as well as in-kind contributions to the fund.
Turning crisis into opportunity: UNICEF’s immunization journey in Tunisia

Immunization is one of the fundamental building blocks of a life of health, well-being, and prosperity. So when in 2018 Tunisia’s Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey identified a startling decrease of 14 per cent in children’s basic immunization, urgent and bold action was needed. To meet this need, UNICEF deployed Core Resources (RR) over six years to support a pioneering plan designed to strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of the country’s immunization system. With the flexibility that only RR provides, UNICEF Tunisia was able to successfully adapt to the challenges of COVID-19, turning it into an opportunity to modernize the country’s handling of perishable vaccines (referred to as the ‘cold chain’) to meet required international standards, as well as to introduce digital innovations and real-time data that benefit not only the children of Tunisia but the entire population.

The first step on our journey was to assess the adequacy of the cold chain – all the elements that come together to ensure that the right vaccines arrive in perfect condition wherever they are needed. We discovered serious deficiencies in vaccine storage quality and capacity, such as 98 per cent of refrigerators not meeting WHO standards. In addition, working with WHO experts and again supported by RR, we identified that the lack of an automated vaccination registry was a key barrier to effectively monitor vaccination coverage and to counter its decline.

The next step on our journey was to use RR to test trailblazing new solutions inspired by our analysis. Our insights into the importance of a centralized vaccine registration system led to a pilot project for the implementation of a digital child immunization card (TUNeVACC) and registry, conducted with the Ministry of Health in two governorates. When the COVID pandemic struck, there was a serious challenge: How would the system cope? Thanks to RR, however, things were already moving at pace, and UNICEF Tunisia was able to turn a crisis into an opportunity. Our insights into the quality of cold chain had advanced the government’s vaccine plan, without which preparations for the COVID vaccine introduction would have taken much longer.
An immediate investment of $500,000 leveraged earmarked funding from a partner allowed UNICEF to start improving vaccine storage capacity and made it possible for Tunisia to accept COVID-19 vaccines once they became available. For example, one of the criteria for the receipt of COVID-19 vaccines was the availability of fridge tags – an electronic 30-day temperature recorder – something Tunisia did not have. UNICEF was able to rapidly respond to this need, playing a catalytic role in facilitating the country’s readiness for vaccine deployment. We demonstrated that cost-effective improvements in the cold chain were possible, and leveraged additional resources from Gavi and other partners to make it a reality. Today, thanks to UNICEF’s partnerships and support, **80 per cent of Tunisia’s cold chain capacity has been replaced with WHO-compliant refrigerators.**

As Dr. Ali Tabbal, Director of the Mother and Child Health Centre in Kébili, noted: “Since Kébili is a desert province and is more than 500 kilometres from the capital, where the vaccines are sent, the cold chain is vital to maintain a stable low temperature to keep vaccines safe and effective. This is why assistance from UNICEF and the Ministry of Health – in the form of freezers, refrigerators, and temperature-monitoring devices – is so important.”

These examples typify how, time and again, RR builds the foundations that change lives at scale. Over the past two years we have been further scaling up our work in a way that not only reaches all the children of the country but also takes a ‘whole child’ approach and addresses other, interlinked, challenges. Thanks to RR, we have been able to expand the national digital vaccine registry (EVAX) created for the COVID-19 vaccine to include all routine vaccinations, and subsequently supported its further expansion so that it also includes growth data, which means that child nutrition and development can now be more closely monitored. Finally, we have introduced a new cold chain module for the planning and management of vaccines to future-proof Tunisia’s cold chain.

“We are in a much better position now than before, and I attribute this to RR,” explains Michel Le Pechoux, UNICEF Tunisia Representative. “In just a few years inadequate cold chain equipment has been replaced, and soon a new vaccination registry will have replaced the outdated offline model. Children benefit because the system is no longer prone to human errors and delays. We can monitor in real-time, and this means better targeting in high-risk regions and better contact with parents – especially identifying and reaching children living in poverty whose parents have low trust or could have otherwise fallen off the public health system radar. The EVAX 2.0, which will be launched in May 2024, will make vaccine planning and management capacity even stronger.”

Making changes that last long term takes time. Thanks to the support of RR over several years, UNICEF has been able to offer technical expertise and play the role of convenor. Today, not only is the country better prepared for the next emergency but all children are directly benefitting from a stronger immunization system and are receiving immunization services that are of higher quality and more comprehensive.
Leveraging resources to transform education outcomes for girls in Bangladesh

Following a concerted effort by the Government of Bangladesh, UNICEF, and other partners, girls and boys in Bangladesh are now enrolled in primary and secondary education in equal proportions. With no time to rest on our laurels, however, the next challenge has been to shift the focus from ‘access’ to ‘outcomes’. Specifically, this means addressing the fact that far fewer girls than boys go on to complete secondary school, and that girls’ choices are often driven by gender norms. For example, in the previous curriculum, in which STEM subjects were optional, only about 30 per cent of Grade-9 girls chose to study science.

UNICEF’s ambitious solution has been nothing short of a reimagining of education in the country, a bold vision of supporting girls through a more enabling environment both within the education system and outside it. To turn this ambitious plan into reality we have drawn on a portfolio of resources, with RR at the core. We have also relied on OR in the form of thematic and earmarked funds from other donors. In addition, we have built a range of strategic partnerships with the government and multilateral organizations.

Importantly, RR has enabled UNICEF’s role as Chair of the Bangladesh Development Partner Consortium; and we have used this key platform to strategically engage our government and education sector partners, thus leveraging the nation’s ongoing education-sector reform to spearhead the introduction of gender-transformative approaches. Together, we have built the momentum for change; and it is the flexibility of RR funding that has enabled UNICEF to provide the government with the necessary high-quality technical expertise to take this strategic work forward.

SDG indicator 4.1.1 Bangladesh has a more inclusive and gender-equitable system to access learning opportunities.

Shahana and her friend saunter through the village path, surrounded by the vibrant green of the paddy fields.
OR funding was used for the development and roll out of the National Curriculum Framework, which is competency-based and gender-transformative. This curriculum package includes learning and pedagogical materials as well as assessment tools – all designed to make education more meaningful, and that focus on empowerment through the development of knowledge, skills, attitude, and values. Since 2023 this new curriculum has been rolled out by the government in all schools for Grades 6 and 7, which has opened doors for about 4 million secondary school children to explore the world of STEM. Crucially, core science education is now compulsory for every child till Grade 10.

Deepa Sankar, UNICEF Bangladesh’s Chief of Education, highlights the significance: “Science and technology education helps to form a self-image of being capable, resourceful, and able to contribute to solving important problems. And this builds confidence, which is critical for girls given their limited opportunities to act and be seen as innovators in their daily lives.”

Sankar explains the challenges of rolling out such an ambitious programme: “So many students and educators are accustomed to the traditional ‘chalk and talk’ method. These transitions are not easy, and securing strong buy-in from teachers, parents, and the community is something that requires ongoing work. But thanks to RR, we have been able to carry out continued advocacy with all stakeholders to implement these gender-transformative approaches and to improve the knowledge of parents on how negative gender norms affect girls’ lives and long-term opportunities. Things really are changing.”

Looking to the future, UNICEF will continue to use RR to provide expert advice, keep the issue high on the agenda, and strengthen our local partnerships. Indeed, we have ongoing support from multiple partners for the new curricula to be rolled out to Grades 8 and 9 in 2024, benefitting an additional 4 million students.

Ms. Nanda Rani Das, who has been teaching science for 22 years, says it is not just the curriculum that has changed. “In the past, fewer girls completed school, and even those who stayed in school did not want to take science subjects. The perception was that girls are made for marriage, and therefore it is not important for them to study much. Fortunately, attitudes are changing. It’s easier for girls to venture into science fields today than it was in my time, as they have more support from their families and their communities to pursue their education goals.”

Ayesha and her team showcase their solar system science project at Ramshundar High School in Bishwanath, Sylhet, Bangladesh. The curriculum has provided Ayesha with the chance to push her boundaries and delve deeper into exploration.