

Update on the context and situation of children

The 2019 UNICEF Situation Analysis (SitAn) provided an in-depth overview of the status of children and adolescents in the country, the changing context and the implications for children. Lao PDR made considerable progress in several critical areas related to children, but inequalities remain with significant disparities between urban and rural areas, upland and lowland regions, wealth quintiles, mother's education levels and ethnic groups (Lao Social Indicator Survey 2017). While monetary poverty is reducing, children in Lao PDR still experience significant levels of deprivation. Addressing multidimensional deprivation among children requires investment in human capital and multi-sectoral convergent interventions, especially for children living in rural areas without road access (Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis 2018).

The 2019 SitAn shows that significant progress is being made in reducing infant and under-five mortality, but maternal mortality remains high and disparities persist; Lao PDR still has the highest maternal mortality ratio among ASEAN countries. The coverage of essential health and nutrition interventions and practices is still low, especially among vulnerable groups, and progress in combating undernutrition in children is slow. Coverage of WASH services is improving but challenges remain and progress in ensuring good hygiene and adequate water quality needs to be accelerated. While universal coverage in primary school enrolment has been achieved and access rates are on the rise for secondary education, attendance and dropout rates are persisting challenges. The country has nearly achieved gender parity in enrolment at primary level, but gender parity in gross enrolment and completion is not yet achieved at secondary level. Completion rates are still low across the entire system and much more progress is required to improve the quality and outcomes of education. Access to early childhood education increased significantly but is still limited to a third of children aged 36-59 months. While various components of a child protection system are in place, a stronger and more integrated child protection system is needed to protect children at risk. While Lao PDR is giving increasing importance to children's and youth participation in its development dialogue, adolescents and youth are facing their share of lifestyle-related challenges which prevent them from realizing their full potential. Young people need to be better educated on measures to protect themselves from risks, with adolescent girls requiring special attention.

In 2019, Lao PDR carried out a comprehensive assessment of LDC graduation, identifying capacity development priorities for fostering productive capacities and structural economic transformation to ensure a sustainable graduation. A smooth transition strategy is crucial to cushion against external shocks, such as decreasing foreign direct investments, and build resilience. As a priority of its 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) 2016-2020, the Lao Government aims to further reduce poverty significantly and graduate from its Least Developed Country (LDC) status. Recent years of strong economic growth helped Lao PDR meet two of the three inter-related criteria for LDC graduation in 2018. If Lao PDR sustains development gains and meets the criteria again in 2021, it will be formally removed from the list of LDCs in 2024. For Lao PDR to graduate in 2024, it will need to maintain its steady progress in the Human Assets Index and reduce its Economic Vulnerability Index. The former requires accelerating the decline in under-five mortality rate, decreasing undernourishment rates within the total population, and increasing the literacy rate and secondary gross enrolment ratio. The latter requires increasing economic resilience, diversifying the country's exports, increasing the stability of agricultural production, and reducing the share of the agricultural and resources sectors in the total GDP.

With the impact of climate change, natural hazards and disasters, especially floods, are taking place more frequently, affecting human lives as well as local economies through damage to industrial and social infrastructure, and rural communities are particularly vulnerable. The increased frequency and severity of these events has put pressure on growth prospects and fiscal space. The Government is taking actions to address climate change: Lao PDR became the first country in ASEAN to ratify the Paris Agreement on Climate Change by passing a national law on its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution and in 2019 the country adopted a National Green Growth Strategy and issued a Climate Change decree.

Progress is made in localizing the SDGs and integrating SDG indicators into national planning frameworks. The 8th NSEDP has embedded the SDGs into its three outcomes, each of which relates to one of the three dimensions of the 2030 Agenda: economic, social, and environmental. Nearly 60 per cent of NSEDP indicators are linked to SDG indicators, the remaining SDG indicators will be integrated into the 9th and 10th NSEDPs. Lao PDR successfully participated in the 2018 Voluntary National Review (VNR) at the UN High-Level Political Forum. The next Voluntary National Review on 2030 Agenda implementation is due in 2021.

The 2019 national Round Table process focused on reviewing the 8th NSEDP and preparing for the 9th NSEDP 2021-2025, which should reflect stronger linkages between planning, budgeting and spending, and the alignment of various planning instruments and processes. Further efforts are needed to translate national commitments into local action by fostering multi-sectoral actions aligned with policy priorities at sub-national level through supporting the design, implementation and monitoring of Provincial and District Socio-Economic Development Plans aligned to the 9th NSEDP, including a gradual transition to domestic resources, increased accountability and monitoring of results at local level, and strengthening

financial and human capacity of provincial and district authorities aligned to the national Three Builds policy. It will be extremely important to accelerate fiscal stabilization and consolidation to ensure sustainable economic growth. Currently, low labour productivity hinders large scale investments. With a high degree of ODA dependency in Health and Education and fiscal constraints, the continued prioritization of gender-sensitive public spending in Health and Education and vocational training is essential to ensure the country can reap the benefits of its young population and is able to translate investments into a skilled and productive workforce.

Lao PDR continues to harmonize national laws, policies and programmes with its international human rights commitments but implementation lags. Lao PDR has acceded to or ratified seven of the nine Human Rights Treaties and two out of four Optional Protocols, however most reports to treaty bodies and committees are overdue. In 2015, the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review made 196 recommendations to address these gaps, of which the Government has accepted 116. The next Review on Lao PDR will be in 2020.

In 2019, the Government presented its plan for implementation of the CRC Concluding Observations for the 3rd – 6th periodic State Report which includes the integration of the concluding observations into sectoral and local work plans, human resource work plans and budget plans. Marking the 30th anniversary of the CRC in 2019, the Lao Government endorsed the Global Pledge and launched the 'Lao Generation 2030' initiative which promotes increased investments in children and young people along the life course. The Government confirmed its commitment to developing human capital by reducing the percentage of children who are multi-dimensionally deprived according to the national definition by half by 2030 while ensuring a reduction of at least 30 percent in each province by 2025. Furthermore, the Government expressed its commitment to making investments in children, adolescents and young people a key priority and important pillar of the 9th NSEDP which will be finalized in 2020.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Goal 1: Every Child Survives and Thrive

Major milestones in 2019 included the revised Primary Health Care Policy and development of a strategy and implementation plan to strengthen community health. The new policy is in line with the Declaration of Astana's global commitment to primary health care for all and focusses on providing universal access to health and nutrition services for all ethnical groups through increased community participation.

Leading a Luxembourg-funded UN Joint Programme in collaboration with WHO and UNFPA, UNICEF continued to support the Ministry of Health in implementing the national Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) Strategy 2016-2025. UNICEF and partners supported the revision of the Sexual Reproductive Maternal Neonatal Child Adolescent Health Policy and the national RMNCAH Strategy and its 5-year Action Plan to be more people-centered, to increase the focus on adolescent health and community health and integrate nutrition across the continuum of care.

UNICEF, in collaboration with the EU and other partners, led support for implementation of the National Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan. A major milestone for good nutrition for young children was achieved with the signing of the National Decree on Breastmilk Substitutes and Designated Products by the Prime Minister. High level advocacy and leadership on nutrition was highlighted at the fifth National Nutrition Forum which focused on investments in nutrition for building human capital.

Progress was made to strengthen multisectoral coordination for nutrition, at central level and at provincial level across 10 out of 18 provinces. Capacity to manage and analyze data to track progress, inform policy and improve programmes was strengthened and analytical work, including the review of the national nutrition strategy and action plan and an analysis of financial allocations/contributions for nutrition was undertaken.

UNICEF supported implementation of the Essential Health Services Package through the development and institutionalization of guidelines, standards for capacity building of district supervisors, health workers and village health committees, and service delivery for the Integrated Management of Newborn and Childhood Illness (IMNCI), the Integrated Management of Acute Malnutrition (IMAM) and Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF), as well as community newborn care.

UNICEF also supported the dissemination of the Immunization Law and the development of a "Communication for Immunization" plan which includes a costed operational plan; an EPI Comprehensive Multiyear Plan to improve the National Immunization Program and Integrated MCH/Nutrition/EPI microplanning guidelines.

Goal 2: Every child learns

UNICEF's support influenced national priorities and policies towards institutionalizing reforms aimed at strengthening early childhood education provision, professional support to primary teachers and principals, measurement of learning outcomes in primary and secondary education, emergency response, and broader education M&E, planning and budgeting processes. The UNICEF-EU partnership for education and UNICEF's role in sector coordination are crucial in accelerating these reforms to improve education quality and meet targets in the education sector plan, the UN Partnership Framework education outcome, and SDG4.

UNICEF continued to be a key partner of MoES, providing technical support, evidence and facilitating coordination with Development Partners in institutionalizing reforms to achieve targets under the 8th Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP), the 8th NSEDP and SDGs. Data for 2018-19 shows the Government is on track to meet outcome indicators under the ESDP 2016-20: 5-year-old enrolment expanded from 66% (2015) to 79.4% (2019) on track to achieve the 80% ESDP 2020 target; more children are reaching Grade 5 from 78.3% (2015) to 82% (2019), with survival rates of girls (83.8%) slightly higher than boys; Grade 1 repetition has decreased from 13.5% in 2015 to 8.4% in 2019 (girls 7.4%); and lower secondary gross enrolment rate (2019: 82.8%) is on track to meet the 85% ESDP target.

Children from poor families, in remote rural areas, non-Lao speaking households, and those with disabilities are left behind. Among 5-year-olds, only 53% from the poorest households attend ECE programmes while 95% from the richest do. For children 11-14 years old from non-Lao-Tai speaking households, primary completion rate is about 70% vis-à-vis 85% from Lao-Tai speaking households. And while children are in school, they are not learning.

UNICEF's support to policy development, standards setting, systems strengthening, complemented by modeling and evidence generation accelerate improvements in making quality education accessible to all learners. A draft early childhood education (ECE) policy is ready for approval. The pre-primary curriculum and supporting materials have been revised, ready for rollout in 2020. More children in hard to reach communities are enjoying ECE opportunities through the community-based school readiness (CBSR) programme, an evaluation of which was completed in 2019.

In basic education UNICEF supported MoES in designing and adjusting key interventions and facilitating coordination among MoES departments. Work around making the education M&E system more coherent is underway. UNICEF is supporting MoES institutionalize continuous professional development support for primary teachers and school principals. A training package for pedagogical advisers has been finalized and is being rolled out nationwide.

UNICEF supported MoES undertake a national assessment of learning outcomes at Grade 9 and started groundwork for a Grade 5 assessment. Laos participated in the Southeast Asia-Primary Learning Metrics initiative, a regionally comparable assessment of how Grade 5 students perform in reading, writing, math and global citizenship.

UNICEF played a key role in sector coordination and policy dialogue: ensuring recommendations of the 8th ESDP MTR were taken forward; facilitating coordination and technical discussions around ECE and basic education as co-chair of the thematic groups on ECE and general education; providing technical inputs and ensuring a participatory process in the development of the ESDP 2021-25. As Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Coordinating Agency along with Australia, UNICEF continued to play a crucial role in shaping priorities for the next round of GPE grants. UNICEF's partnership with the EU, launched in 2018, is crucial in expanding strategic support to the sector, and coordinated advocacy with the Government.

Advocacy for investing in education was well received by Government and Development Partners. This is crucial as budget for the education sector continues to stagnate and fall below the SDG benchmark of 15-20% of total government expenditure and ESDP target of 17%.

In 2019, six provinces were affected by flooding. As Education Cluster co-lead, UNICEF supported the rapid assessment and response. With support from Australia, textbooks were re-printed for 28,971 pre-school, primary and lower secondary students.

Goal 3: Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

In 2019, major achievements are the child protection system assessment report, a child protection system strengthening vision paper and a draft plan of actions. To articulate the national vision for child protection, a cross-sectoral working committee played a steering role in involving key Ministries, including the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Lao Women's Union, National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children, UN, NGOs and academic partners. The new vision focuses on reducing vulnerabilities affecting child well-being through a system approach, building children's resilience and expanding their capacity to benefit from life opportunities. An action plan with key indicators based on the vision document was developed for inclusion in the development of the 9th NSEDP and a National Plan of Action for Children foreseen in 2020.

Available data (LSIS 2011, 2017) shows that despite good progress, such as the reduction of children aged 1-14 who experience violent punishment (from 77% to 69%), and significant decrease of adult caregivers' belief towards physical punishment (from 42% to 25%), key protection issues affecting children remain: 69% of children aged 1-14 still experience violent punishment; birth registration of children under five has stagnated around 73%; and 32.7% of women aged 20-49 still marry before the age of 18.

Continued GOL-UNICEF's efforts brought substantial progress and achievements in strengthening national capacity to ensure availability of and access to services especially at community level. Trainings were provided to 487 government officials on different thematic areas, incl. justice for children, care for children with disabilities, victim identification, referrals and counselling skills.

UNICEF partnered with MOLSW and NUOL to test the training manual for the social welfare workforce, including sub-national LSW staff and the Child Protection Network (CPN). UNICEF supported the training of 72 CPN members from 11 villages on their roles and responsibilities. As of now, CPN exists in a total of 1,248 villages nationwide (12% coverage).

UNICEF continued efforts on ensuring availability of, and access to, social welfare, protection and justice services. In 2019, these services included community-based legal/social assistance and diversion services reaching 930 children in contact with the law; care and protection for 109 children with disabilities; comprehensive protection services provided to 141 victims of violence and trafficking; Lao Women's Union counselling support to 123 children; support to 344 children through the drop-in center and reintegration of street children; and birth registration of 783 children. The National Guideline for the Protection and Assistance to Victims of Trafficking was finalized. Additional achievements are the set-up of Child Prosecutor Units under the Criminal Department of the Supreme Prosecutor's office and upgrading the facilities of the child interview room at LWU shelter for victim of violence and trafficking.

UNICEF provided recovery support to people living in disaster affected areas. In 2019, 3,039 children received psychosocial supports through Child Friendly Spaces (CFS). UNICEF documented the experience of CFS to acknowledge the country's first-ever experience in Child Protection in Emergency (CPIE). Key interventions shifted to long-term recovery, with a focus on ensuring a family environment for orphans, capacity building of social welfare workforce, and providing preventive and alternative services, including life skills training to adolescents.

To promote positive changes in people's attitudes and behaviour regarding violence against children (VAC), UNICEF integrated C4D approaches in all programme interventions. Capacity building was provided to 126 adolescents to develop messages that resonate with their communities, support peers and deliver awareness raising activities, reaching around 3,200 members of their communities on their wish to end violence in homes and schools and avoid child marriage. Awareness raising events were organized on VAC prevention, trafficking, child marriage, teen pregnancy, child rights and justice.

Goal 4: Every child lives in a safe and clean environment

2019 saw significant progress in most areas, with strategic changes evident in the approval of the national policy and rural WASH strategy, growing momentum towards national ODF and development of the national WASH in Schools (WinS) guidelines and standards and community WASH service management.

Outcome targets are broadly on-track. Access to improved water sources in 2018 (84 per cent) is ahead of the 2019 target (83 per cent), and the 2021 target for WASH coverage in schools (65 per cent) was achieved ahead of time in 2019 (66 per cent). However, the intermittent nature of national survey data means that there remains uncertainty on the sanitation target (74 per cent in 2018 against a 2019 target of 77 per cent).

With three of four Lao households accessing basic sanitation (71 per cent; 66 per cent rural and 95 per cent in urban settings), about one in four Lao children (24 per cent) still defecate in the open (33 per cent; 4 per cent urban). Saravane Province residents are 50 times more likely to defecate in the open than residents of Vientiane Capital. The national approach, to raise rural demand for sanitation facilities, has achieved only moderate success, largely reliant on donor support and provincial/district government leadership. The complex nature of social mobilization, high costs of household sanitation infrastructure, limited budget investment and the lack of a national strategy to achieve ODF mean that progress is slow, with over 1.5 million people still without access to basic sanitation. Whilst most Lao households having handwashing facilities (90 per cent), less than two thirds of these households (60 per cent) use soap. The situation in schools is similarly challenged, with two out of three schools with access to toilets and water. Whilst Laos has relatively high access rates for basic water supply (78 per cent), only one in seven Lao households drink safe water; yet despite this poor drinking water quality, only one in three (37 per cent) Lao households treats drinking water at home.

Challenges in improving WASH services are exacerbated by the constrained macro-economic situation, limited government

funding and weak WASH policy and strategy frameworks. Low prioritization of WASH services in the 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) is reflected by very low associated budget allocations.

The launch of the national WASH Policy and the rural WASH strategy in 2019 provided strategic direction and approaches to address WASH challenges in the country. The focus on equity is critical as the country progresses towards Middle-Income status. The policy and strategy establish clear ambitious targets to achieve universal access to basic WASH services, enabling appropriate strategies and targets to be incorporated into the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2021-2025) to guide WASH investment.

UNICEF-supported social mobilization approaches are demonstrating increasing success, together with other sector partners, with five districts now declared open defecation free (ODF). Momentum is growing nationally, with all provincial Vice-Governors committing their provinces in December to achieve ODF by 2025. Improving results will be used to support advocacy for greater investment by government and partners in sanitation social mobilization programmes to support provinces to achieve their ODF targets. Importantly, the behavior change approach also incorporates handwashing with soap, meaning that progress towards national ODF will also result in significant increases in rates of handwashing with soap.

The endorsement of the national 'WASH in schools' guidelines and standards provides direction for the country to achieve universal coverage of WASH in schools. The approach is based on the 3-Star approach, providing guidance on iterative steps that schools can take to move towards achieving the national standards.

UNICEF supported demonstration of water safety planning (WSP) can be used to demonstrate how water safety planning can help villages to incrementally improve their water management and achieve safely managed supplies.

The Government took the lead in responding to 2019 floods across Lao PDR that displaced over 100,000 people; however there remains weak capacity, particularly at the provincial and district level to plan for and respond to disasters. UNICEF supported government with technical assistance on the assessment and the release of emergency WASH supplies. Flood resilient water supplies are being constructed with UNICEF support in six flood-prone villages in Attapeu to strengthen community resilience. Evidence collected from these pilots and ongoing community-based disaster risk reduction approaches will inform government and partner capacity development to better prepare and respond to future natural disasters.

In demonstrating resilient water supplies, scalable sanitation and hygiene social mobilization approaches and the recently endorsed WASH in Schools standards, in 2019 UNICEF has provided water supplies to 10 villages, supported 36 villages to become ODF and provided 12 primary and pre-primary schools with WASH facilities.

Goal 5: Every child has an equitable chance in life

UNICEF seized the opportunity of the 30th anniversary of the CRC to strengthen partnerships with Government, donors, private sector, media and youth organizations. Marking the CRC@30, the Government with support from UNICEF and in collaboration with key partners launched the Lao Generation 2030 initiative and confirmed its commitment to reducing child deprivations and making investments in children and adolescents a priority of the NSEDP 2021-2025. In support of this initiative, UNICEF organized public advocacy events, media engagement, community mobilization, consultations and youth engagement activities, which culminated in the Lao Generation 2030 Forum in November. The event, attended by the highest level of Government, saw important stakeholders pledge support to the Government's commitment to realize the rights of every child in Laos by 2030. In November the Lao Generation 2030 vision was presented at the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the 30th anniversary of CRC, where a Lao Youth advocate was invited to give a presentation on education.

Engagement in policy dialogue on human capital development provided an opportunity to advocate for investments in children, adolescents and young people. Through the regional EU-UNICEF Public Finance Facility UNICEF initiated the formulation of a Public Finance Management strategy. UNICEF in collaboration with the Resident Coordinator, ILO and UNCDF launched a new joint programme on Social Protection funded by the Joint SDG Fund, providing an opportunity for UNICEF to pilot a Mother and Early Childhood Grant.

UNICEF actively promoted evidence generation and advocacy in support of child rights. Using LSIS-II data, UNICEF supported a Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis. The MODA provides the baseline information for tracking progress towards Target 1.2 of SDG1, with the aim of reducing the percentage of children who are multi-dimensionally deprived according to the national definition by half by 2030. Several secondary analyses were carried out in 2019 including a nutrition/stunting analysis, immunization analysis, and education analysis. The National Information Platform for Nutrition specifically consolidates nutrition-related data from relevant sectors to support the development of evidence-based policies and programming and builds national capacity on data and policy analysis for improved nutrition.

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UNICEF is supporting the Government to model a system strengthening approach in selected provinces for improving data generation and use and improving the capacity of relevant sectors on planning and budgeting. Modelling this approach in selected provinces intends to strengthen sub-national planning, monitoring and coordination to deliver results for children in a holistic manner.

UNICEF worked to expand youth engagement both online and offline, strengthen journalists' capacity to report on issues affecting children's lives and raise awareness about child rights, while promoting their participation in society as active citizens. UNICEF engaged 200 Youth Media members who were trained on radio production techniques resulting in 1,450 radio programmes aired. In addition, 130 young people participated in consultations and presented the outcomes to the Deputy Prime Minister on International Children's Day. Inputs from those consultations fed into the Lao Generation 2030 Forum, where 100 children made a call to action to improve the situation of children in Laos.

UNICEF made progress in the improvement of social norms and behaviours relating to child survival and development using C4D practices through the development of the parenting package and dissemination strategy.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

The 2019 Mid-Term Review (MTR) of the Country Programme of Cooperation of the Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and UNICEF was conducted at mid-way through the five-year implementation cycle. The MTR took account of information and data from regular programme monitoring, evaluations, and sector consultancy reports, as well as specific MTR-related processes such as the 2019 Situation Analysis, visits and workshops with UNICEF Regional Advisors, and consultations with Government sector ministries, development partners, civil society, the private sector, and children and adolescents themselves. The objectives of the MTR were to identify required adjustments to accelerate the achievement of planned programme results; to align UNICEF support to national development plans and evolving global priorities, particularly considering Lao PDR's impending 2024 "graduation" from Least Developed Country Status and its expected transition to "Upper Middle Income" status in 2030; and to accelerate action at scale to tackle child deprivations.

The MTR has been conducted in three phases. Phase one focused on evidence generation and a Situation Analysis to reflect changes in the national and sub-national priorities and policies, reflecting UNICEF global priorities, defining major new or emerging opportunities for programme cooperation strengthening, and indicating how these could be taken forward in the current and next Country Programmes. Phase two entailed synthesis and assessment of evidence from phase one, consolidating the findings, elaborating recommendations for adjustments, and ensuring alignment with UNICEF regional and global priorities. Phase three focused on implementing the proposed shifts during the remainder of the current Country Programme, contributing to the development of the Country Programme 2022-2026, the UN Common Country Assessment (CCA) and the UN Partnership Framework (UNPF) 2022-2026.

The findings of the 2019 Situation Analysis (SitAn) show that Lao PDR has made significant progress for children and adolescents, including achieving many of the targets of the global Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, significant shortcomings remain regarding child rights as a critical factor in developing Lao PDR's human capital to permit accelerated development to achieve both national development objectives and the global objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030. Recent evidence and analyses (LSIS-II, MODA, etc.) demonstrate that, while there is good progress in several areas, significant disparities persist, particularly affecting children from rural areas, girls, and children from non-Lao-Thai ethnic groups, all of whom continue to fare worse than other children in health, nutrition, education and protection indicators. Another group of findings indicate that significant bottlenecks remain with respect to policy development and implementation, the availability of national budgetary resources, inter-institutional coordination, institutional capacity (especially at the provincial, district and community levels); shortfalls in service quality, low levels of demand for existing services, and the persistence of harmful social norms including violence against children, child labor, child marriage and negative attitudes against children with disabilities.

The 2019 MTR found that the Government of Lao PDR-UNICEF Programme of Cooperation is generally on track towards its foreseen results, with certain areas that need to be accelerated or strengthened, some new strategies that are required, and a few areas of UNICEF cooperation that should be phased out. Aligning with Lao PDR's plans to graduate from LDC status by 2024, and in response to increasing urbanisation and climate change, scaling-up should be the focus for the remainder of the current Country Programme and the Country Programme 2022-2026, converging around (i) system strengthening, (ii) policy advocacy and partnerships, and (iii) demand creation and participation. Innovation and Technology for Development (T4D) will be mainstreamed across strategies.

Systems strengthening: As the country is moving towards middle-income country status and many programmes are in transition or graduation, it is imperative to focus on system strengthening. UNICEF will reduce its service delivery

component and system support interventions in favour of system strengthening. A more robust approach to the implementation of demonstration and modelling projects will be adopted, linking them more closely to system strengthening and scaling-up strategies. For example, in health, a strategic shift from a programme-focused approach (MCH, Immunization and Nutrition) to health system strengthening, particularly at sub-national level, is required.

UNICEF will also focus on strengthening its work in Public Finance Management (PFM) to support scaling-up based on investment and sustainability plans, and planning/monitoring the implementation of budgets for children. UNICEF will also increase documentation of models of capacity building for provincial and district planning and coordination and make recommendations for its replication in the Country Programme 2022-2026, including for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR).

Policy advocacy and partnerships: UNICEF will develop innovative mechanisms to generate more frequent data and evidence to improve decision making on critical priorities for children, including use of new technologies and other new approaches. UNICEF's new engagement in Social Protection – including Mother and Child Cash Grants modelling – requires a more robust Theory of Change for Social Inclusion, considering crucial linkages with the Child Protection System and Parenting Package.

UNICEF will continue to strengthen partnerships and alliance building in favour of children and adolescents, seeking enhanced accountability for the implementation of child-related policies and programmes, including with the private sector. As one of the key priorities for the 9th NSEDP and building on the strong alliance with key development partners, focus will be laid on the renewed commitments to CRC@30, to support and sustain investments in children and young people who will be born and grow up between now and 2030.

Demand creation and participation: The Country Programme will focus more on areas which are lagging, particularly improving ECCD practices, including health, nutrition, WASH and parenting, birth registration, and ending child marriage. In this regard, UNICEF will make use of expanded strategies for Communication for Development (C4D) to accelerate and expand convergent social behaviour change interventions, especially for remote, excluded and vulnerable children and populations. Moreover, UNICEF will expand its Youth and Adolescents programming, focusing on the most important factors affecting adolescent girls, primarily early marriage and adolescent pregnancies, which are closely linked to school dropouts.