

Update on the context and situation of children

Context

Oman's GDP per capita stood at US \$17,227.7 at the end of 2018, placing the country in the high-income category. Oman ranks 48 on the Human Development Index, indicating *very high human development*. The country's economy is highly dependent on oil and gas, which contributed 78.2 per cent of Government revenue. Low oil prices since mid-2014 have placed pressure on the economy and continue to affect the sustainability of Oman's expenditure model, including allocations for universal coverage of health, education and social protection.

The Government has launched *Tanfeedh*, a programme aimed at economic diversification. In 2019, Oman also embarked on a fiscal reform programme which includes an increase in corporate taxation, introduction of excise taxes on various goods, plans for value-added tax, and the improvement in efficiency of fiscal administration.

At the end of 2018 the population was 4.6 million; of those, 2.6 million were Omanis and two million were expatriates. The population of nationals is relatively young compared to the expatriate population, with 15.3 per cent of Omanis under five years of age, and 45.7 per cent under 20 years of age, compared to 1.6 and 5.1 per cent, respectively, for the expatriate population.

Omanis constituted 84.5% of total employment in the public sector, compared to 13% in the private sector. High reliance on an expat workforce indicates that the education system must be reformed to deliver the transformative learning required to equip Omani youth with the demands of a modern economy. The youth unemployment rate (ages 18-24) was 5.4 per cent versus the 1.8 per cent national unemployment rate. Unemployment among females of the same cohort stood at 13.8 compared to 3.9 per cent for males.

Women and Children

The year saw planning towards Vision 2040 as cross-sectoral stakeholders worked on development of the preliminary vision document, which stresses the importance of social and human investment with a focus on empowering "women, children, youth, persons with disabilities and the most vulnerable groups". The Government continued to manifest its commitment to the well-being of children and issued executive regulations of the Child Law.

Health and Nutrition

Oman continued to make impressive strides with its health system. Oman provides free universal health coverage to citizens, thus out of pocket expenditures on health are low - estimated at 1.04 per cent of total expenditure. Affordable essential medicines are available in 100 per cent of health facilities with 20.1 physicians per 10,000 people.

The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) dropped from 120 per 1000 live births in 1972 to 9 in 2018, whereas Under 5 Mortality Rate (U5MR) dropped from 180 to 10 in the same period. Neonatal mortality also declined. Although IMR and U5MR dropped, they plateaued at a level higher than other Gulf countries and more developed countries; this requires attention.

Nutrition is a concern. The 2017 UNICEF-supported National Nutrition Survey found that 11.4 per cent of children were stunted and 9.3 per cent wasted. 3.1 per cent were overweight or obese. Sub-optimal feeding practices are contributing to this; exclusive breastfeeding stood at 23.2 per cent. Maternal nutrition is poor, as shown by the rate of newborns with low birthweight (11.7 per cent) and anaemia rate amongst pregnant women (29.3 per cent). Disparities between regions are prevalent. In 2019, the Ministry of Health launched a Non-Communicable Diseases strategy and mainstreamed a nutrition action plan across governorates.

Early Childhood Development and Education

Increasing access to Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD) is a priority and during 2019 the Government worked with UNICEF on an IECD Model to inform expansion. Oman's ECD index rate is 68 per cent, lower than in some poorer countries. Most services are in larger cities and operated by private sector entities, making them inaccessible to children of lower-income, especially in remote areas.

Pre-primary enrolment figures lag behind others in the region. In 2016, 68.2 per cent of children participated in formal learning one year before enrolling in primary school. The Ministry of Education initiated pre-school classes in remote governorates. Childcare institutions provided by the Ministry of Social Development also play a preschool education role through Child Growth Houses and Children's Corners. Yet, significant progress is needed if early childhood development and

education targets are to be achieved in line with SDG 4.

Education

Oman achieved universal primary education and continues to improve in secondary education enrolment (96.2 per cent in 2018). Gender parity increases in favour of girls as children progress from grades 1 to 12. However, there are issues related to education quality and its alignment with labour market requirements. National and international assessments show learning outcomes below expectations and sizeable disparities between students from different wealth quintiles, and between urban and remote areas. Significant investments are required to ensure integration of students with disabilities within mainstream education. Oman has prioritized education reform to improve the quality of education, its relevance to the labour market and sustainability.

Child Protection

The legal framework for child protection is relatively robust. Social Protection Committees have been set up to prevent and address child abuse. Oman expressed its commitment to prohibiting all corporal punishment of children, which is illegal at school. The Law mandates reporting of child rights violations. In 2018, 1,416 cases of maltreatment were reported. Bullying in schools remains a concern as 29 per cent of students reported having been bullied per month. The most vulnerable are children with disabilities, who are 3.6 times more likely to be victims of physical violence.

Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

Oman offers a range of policies to empower people with disabilities and offers specialised and mainstream services for children with disabilities to achieve their potential. Enhanced cross-sectoral coordination is essential for impactful early interventions for children. Data on children with disabilities is limited and disaggregated data in line with SDG requirements is missing, as are comprehensive data systems on child disability. The 2010 census indicated a national prevalence of 3.2 per cent; children and young people up to age 24 constituted 27.1 per cent of this total; figures are deemed underreported.

Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF worked with Government counterparts, other United Nations agencies, civil society organizations, academic institutions and the private sector to accelerate gains towards achieving progress on prioritised outcome areas:

- Outcome 1. Enhancing children's potential: By 2020, children of all ages have more equitable access to quality services in protection, education and health, and enhanced opportunities to realize their full potential.
- Outcome 2. Making data work for children: Data disaggregated by age, sex, disability, governorate and income are used effectively in planning, monitoring, policy and practice related to children and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Results achieved in 2019 ensured better outcomes for children in Oman, in line with UNICEF's Global Strategic Plan Areas 1, 2, 3 and 5, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), as well as the 2030 Agenda.

Building on analysis from the 2018 country programme review, a wide range of strategies were employed to broaden the programme scope to address issues of policy and legislative gaps, quality of service, institutional capacity, and inadequate behavioral and social norms. Thus, UNICEF focused on a number of strategically selected high-impact interventions that can have catalytic effects.

By investing in cross-sectoral initiatives like the Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD) model and the case management system, UNICEF and its respective partners focused on interventions that provided a holistic and rights-based response to children and their environment.

UNICEF worked on harnessing the power of evidence generation as a driver of change. Research and data were key elements for programming centred around community and service provider perceptions, and practices in the areas of Early Childhood Development (ECD), child protection and inclusion of children with disabilities. Data generated is being leveraged into an evidence-based Social Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) strategy with the aim of promoting positive parenting practices, identified as an area that would reap significant return, given that it cuts across almost all behaviours identified. This was significant for advocacy and the leveraging of partnerships as implementation of the strategy will include a wide range of a stakeholders including United Nations agencies.

Winning support for the cause of children from decision makers and the wider public using an integrated advocacy approach, the UNICEF brand was strengthened through social and traditional media. UNICEF Oman's voice and reach achieved a wider echo than ever before due, in part, to the creation of a LinkedIn account. In a period of eight months, the account amassed over 800 followers with an average of 469 impressions per post and 1.2 thousand profile clicks weekly, becoming UNICEF Oman's fastest growing social media platform. The number of Instagram and Twitter followers grew by 53 and 58 per cent, respectively, with a combined outreach of over four thousand accounts and seven thousand engagements.

By leveraging the power of the private and public sector partners, UNICEF continued to promote and advocate for children's rights and better outcomes. The Leadership Circle, established in 2018 and comprised of members who hold respected positions in both private and public spheres, continued to provide strategic advice to UNICEF and facilitated dialogue between the Government and private sector entities to further act on behalf of children. Accelerating outcomes for children through shared-value partnerships, the engagement between UNICEF and Omantel expanded as the telecommunications company developed action plans for their corporate strategy to be more gender inclusive, child-rights focused and in line with the 2030 Agenda.

UNICEF also continued its engagement with civil society through partnerships with Children First Association to ensure greater community outreach. Through activities like the Muscat International Book Fair, UNICEF and Children First Association were provided opportunities to promote children's rights in line with the 2030 Agenda and the CRC. Engagement with Omani National Football Player and social influencer, Ali Al-Habsi at the Book Fair was key in order to further advocate for children. To ensure continued at-scale results for girls and boys, the capacity of children and youth on the 2030 Agenda was built with support from Children First, and discussions around their aspirations for the future were shared with the Government and integrated into Oman's first Voluntary National Review (VNR) report.

To support young people and children as agents of change during World Children's Day (WCD) and celebrations around the CRC 30-year anniversary, children were provided with an opportunity to be engaged, speak up for their rights and learn of their own potential. Engagement with the Ministers of Health and Information during roundtable discussions and with the private sector during take over activities resulted in a recommitment to the child-rights agenda. Following discussions, students hosted their own press conference to share outcomes of their sessions with the wider public, broadcasted via local channels.

Demonstrating support for children, Government officials, private sector employees and civil society partners wore blue and seven strategic buildings throughout Oman joined the global 'Go Blue' WCD campaign. An educational walkathon, organized in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Development and Children First with support from private sector and quasi-government organizations, saw the active participation of over 400 children, youth, families and Government officials.

Advocacy for policy and legislative changes through high-level engagement proved rewarding. UNICEF support for the implementation of the Oman International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) conference, attended by the Special Representative to the Secretary General on Violence Against Children (SRSG-VAC), rallied stakeholders and the community around the child protection agenda. This resulted in the formation of a cross-sectoral Prevention Working Group that included Government, civil society, academia and the private sector. Meanwhile, UNICEF and senior-level government stakeholders co-organized a side event to the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on SDG target 16.2 *End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children*, resulting in renewed commitment to the child protection agenda, including the pledge to invest in evidence generation around child protection.

Goal Area 1: Every Child Survives and Thrives

IECD is a key programme area that aligns with Oman's commitment to SDGs 2, 3, 4 and 5, as well as the Ninth National Development Plan.

Together with the cross-sectoral IECD taskforce established in 2018, UNICEF developed an IECD model blueprint and action plan which will guide the country's cross-sectoral expansion of quality IECD provisions in line with the Government's goal of ensuring that children reach their physical, cognitive, psychological and social emotional potential, and arrive in school "ready to learn".

The model provides a comprehensive governance structure built on the pre-existing cross-sectoral National Committee for Family Affairs, set to become the overarching body responsible for holistic oversight of the ECD sector. Universal mandatory pre-primary education targeting all children aged five, as well as engagement of parents through parent groups and a home visiting programme were proposed to ensure service expansion with attention to the most underserved and vulnerable populations. Ensuring cost efficiency, the model proposed reliance on existing infrastructure and spaces such as mosques, homes, and clinic spaces. UNICEF closely engaged the Government in dialogue around public finance for children

(PF4C) solutions to ensure that proposed models are costed, financed and ready to be taken to scale by the Government.

UNICEF worked alongside the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the United Nations Population Fund and the national Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD) Taskforce to ensure effective action was taken for better health and nutrition outcomes among women and children. Evidence generated from a Barrier Analysis on Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) practices, implemented with the Ministry of Health, will further inform this work as well as a SBCC strategy to tackle poor feeding and nurturing practices.

Parenting Month was launched as part of UNICEF's CRC 30 year-long advocacy campaign. Information about nurturing practices were shared as UNICEF Oman called on businesses to invest in family-friendly policies that support parents to give their children the best start in life, while encouraging them to spend more time with their children by offering family packages or discounts on services.

Goal Area 2: Every Child Learns

Investment in Oman's education system continued to be a key priority for the Government as UNICEF placed emphasis on strengthening education systems to ensure that schooling translates into rewarding learning outcomes, especially for the most marginalized children. Achievements contributed to Oman's progress towards SDGs 4 and 5.

The Child Friendly Education (CFE) system, developed by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF which promotes equitable learning, personal empowerment, active citizenship, nonviolence, gender equality and employability, was taken to scale. This will result in a rights-based education of higher quality, leading to enhanced teaching-learning outcomes for children and youth, building knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. Ensuring no child was left behind during the scaling of the CFE system, UNICEF, the Ministry of Education and Children First visited secluded villages throughout Oman to engage in conversations with local communities, leaders, teachers, families and children, to learn of their needs and efforts in adopting CFE practices and to promote the Safe to Learn Campaign.

The *Our Children and the Media of the Future* seminar, co-hosted with the Ministry of Information, provided children and young people interested in journalism and media opportunities to learn and put their newfound skills into practice. The seminar also educated teachers and parents on how to combat negative media culture, especially in the form of cyberbullying.

A Training of Trainers Workshop on approaches to inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms was undertaken, resulting in a core group of female and male teacher-trainers with enhanced capacity around inclusion strategies and differentiated approaches to learning. The core group is part of the Ministry of Education Specialised Teacher Training Centre to ensure the institutionalization of training into existing professional programmes. The trainers, as advocates for the inclusion agenda, will take this to scale, enhancing learning outcomes as teaching methods become more responsive to diverse learning needs.

UNICEF and the Ministry of Education started work on a public finance sector analysis around inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education. A costed plan and financing strategy are underway which aligns with work being undertaken by the Education Council, a cross-sectoral committee that reports to the State Council, comprised of the Ministries of Education, Higher Education, and Manpower, among others. Work has commenced on development of a nationwide action plan for educational service delivery to persons with disabilities; synergies with these efforts will be ensured.

Goal Area 3: Every Child is Protected from Violence and Exploitation

Protection of children from violence is a national priority that aligns with the National Childhood Strategy 2015 – 2024, the 2014 Child Law as well as the country's commitment to international conventions and SDGs 1 and 10.

To strengthen systems and services for vulnerable children, a cross-sectoral case management system for well-coordinated care in IECD, protection and inclusion of vulnerable children, established with support from UNICEF in 2018 and endorsed by the Ministries of Education, Health and Social Development, was piloted in two governorates. The pilot aimed to ensure that the system is fully aligned with the country context and sought to identify areas for adjustment. By enhancing coordination between the respective sectors and existing services, the diverse needs of vulnerable children and their families can be met with more effective and sustained impact. The pilot will continue to be implemented across selected schools, primary healthcare facilities, child protection committees and two regional hospitals.

The pilot highlighted the importance of prioritizing automation to facilitate timeliness and effectiveness of services and thus, the system will be automated as an integrated cross-sectoral Management Information System and taken to scale by the Government. Building on learnings from the study tour to Jordan, organized with UNICEF support to allow Omani delegate

the chance explore the PRIMERO Case Management system, an initial plan for automation was agreed by the Government.

The ISPCAN conference, galvanized Oman's commitment to ending VAC and resulted in the formation of a cross-sectoral Prevention Working Group, comprised of key ministries and civil society stakeholders. A road map which will build off each member's comparative advantage is being developed to ensure holistic prevention approaches. Furthermore, the Child Protection Ambassadors programme was launched under the Ministry of Education to provide peer-to-peer support to prevent violence in and around schools.

Goal Area 5: Every Child has an Equitable Chance in Life

The Government and UNICEF focused on ensuring that data on children with disabilities is properly captured and that any child with a disability has access to specialised care and services. Achievements in this area directly contributed to the country's progress in SDG areas 1, 5 and 10.

UNICEF continued working on the development of a unified disability classification system focused on the holistic model of disability across the Ministries of Education, Health and Social Development in an effort to address many barriers that impede results for children with disabilities. To inform development of the system, an assessment of the current situation was undertaken and a number of recommendations were identified and advocated for with the Government, including the need for: enhanced cross-sectoral collaboration across ministries; a move beyond the medical model to a more holistic model of disability; ensuring rehabilitation starts as early as possible and engages caregivers more closely; strengthening of the joint national registry for persons with disabilities between the Ministries of Social Development and Health to allow for immediate referral.

Assessment tools aligned with the Omani context to be used by social workers to detect disability in children from birth through age 18 were developed and validated by Government counterparts. The process is expected to complement the detection process currently being carried out by the Ministry of Health, which follows a strictly medical model. Introduction of a functional assessment approach, which allows for a more holistic and social view of disability, will result in the early detection of disability, giving children the chance to receive care as early as possible and an opportunity to catch up with their peers. Opportunities are being explored for the assessment to be linked to key existing milestones in the health and education systems during which a check-up is mandated by law. This directly relates to work being undertaken on the IECD Model as well as the cross-sectoral case management system; UNICEF is working with the government to ensure synergies across interventions.

Cross – Cutting Work

Evidence Generation and Data

Building on a completed mapping exercise of key SDG child-related indicators against relevant administrative data systems and civil registration, and vital statistics across a wide range of sectors, UNICEF continued working with the National Center for Statistics and Information on a strategy for strengthening relevant data systems. The strategy will allow the Government to work towards better evidence and data to help measure achievements towards Agenda 2030 as recommendations go beyond selected indicators to address broader data system concerns. Key areas for UNICEF support were identified within the strategy, including: (i) the importance of advocating for standardized definitions of poverty and wealth quintiles as well as disability, for improved and clear disaggregation of data; (ii) capacity building around statistical data collection, reconciliation of data across sectors, and use of data; and (iii) collaborating with the World Health Organization to enhance coding around causes of death within health institutions. Findings from the exercise informed the country's VNR report.

A Situation Analysis of Children and Women resulted in a better understanding of the programming context to inform ongoing and future interventions. The study identified opportunities for partnerships with the private sector to promote positive child outcomes and provided insights on the PF4C landscape. Meanwhile, focus group discussions with male and female adolescents ages 10 to 17 years, including those with disabilities, deepened understanding around learning and skills development, mental health, bullying in schools and on social media, as well as gender roles and norms.

The Barrier Analysis was carried out across five governorates and targeted 302 women. Findings included: i) a lack of experience on feeding practices, especially among new mothers; ii) early discontinuation of breastfeeding as mothers go back to work; iii) misconceptions around breastmilk not being sufficient; and iv) the significant role of grandmothers in influencing feeding. The work was carried out with staff from the Ministry of Health ensuring capacity transfer in planning, implementation and analysis of barrier analysis studies.

Meanwhile, a comprehensive qualitative study on Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) was conducted with a focus on IYCF, ECE and ECD, violence against children, and inclusion of children with disabilities. A total of 30 focus group

discussions and 72 In-depth Interviews were undertaken across four governorates with mothers, fathers, female and male youth, and teachers as well as institutions such as early intervention centres, the Council for the CRC, and child protection committees. Evidence showed that there remains a lack of awareness around IYCF. Additionally, the study suggested low awareness and recognition of stunting and wasting, demonstrating the need to raise awareness and educate parents and caregivers about the importance of child feeding. The study confirmed that bullying in schools occurs, particularly against children with disabilities, stressing the need for anti-bullying programmes to address this phenomenon. Involving both mothers and fathers in child rearing and upbringing was also highlighted as important.

Gender

To promote gender equality, gender results were integrated into each of the programme areas including nutrition for women and girls, and equitable learning and skills for girls and boys. UNICEF supported the Government on strengthening the collection and utilization of disaggregated data. Work on strengthening SDG monitoring and reporting through the admin data mapping and strengthening exercise was completed with the intention of enhancing data systems to ensure that key disaggregation requirements such as gender, age and geography are taken into consideration as the country moves forward with its data systems strengthening programmes.

Meanwhile, evidence generated through the KAP study, Barrier Analysis and the Situation Analysis provided a deeper understanding around the roles of women and men in caretaking as well as difference in the challenges and opportunities faced by girls and boys in relation to protection, education and socialization; ensuring that targeted interventions can be undertaken.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Operating in a high-income country such as Oman, which still desires programme support from UNICEF, requires a change from the usual programming modality applicable to lower- and middle-income developing countries. Due to UNICEF's small presence and limited resources, the programme was adjusted to refocus on activities with large-scale impact, visibility, and catalytic effects.

During 2019, UNICEF engaged in more upstream work and the main focus of programme activities was in the form of providing technical support and conducting policy advocacy, among which establishment of models that can be taken to scale by the Government was prioritized. This included work on setting up and piloting the cross-sectoral case management system as well as development of the IECD model. The work on these models has proven to be an effective strategy in a high-income developing country, where the Government has resources to take them to scale.

To ensure the success of models promoted by UNICEF, deliberate efforts were made to ensure that they are based on existing models which have been previously tried and tested in other countries of similar contexts and have yielded results. Other key criteria met, to persuade the government to accept and replicate models, included:

- A focus on approaches that were tangible rather than conceptual and where examples from other countries and contexts existed and could be presented to counterparts;
- Most importantly the models were adaptable and simple enough to fit into existing government systems without difficulty, and were intended to complement existing services and governance structures to allow replication without too much difficulty at national and local levels;
- Ability to show visible results in a short time, while work towards long-term gains was underway,
- In addition, high-level advocacy as well as field visits with Government officials to the pilot sites at the launch stage and later at the review stages, proved essential with ensuring ownership.

While these approaches proved beneficial, the year brought additional lessons that require consideration as UNICEF continues to support the Government with taking these models to scale.

The model must be cost-effective and efficient. Despite Oman being a high-income country, it became evident that in order for supported models to be taken to scale and result in impactful change it is imperative that they are accompanied by costed action plans and financing strategies. This would allow line Ministries to make an investment case for prioritizing such models over other programming approaches. During 2020, UNICEF will therefore prioritize working with the Government on public finance for children solutions so that it can best be supported to scale up proposed models.

Roll-out of cross-sectoral national programmes require significant investment in human resource capacity, which requires enhancement despite Oman's high-income status; this is particularly true in relation to service delivery at local levels where child-centred approaches are lacking. Piloting of the cross-sectoral case management

system highlighted the increasing need for a well-qualified social service workforce that has the skills required to successfully support case management processes in relation to identification, communication, assessment, referral, child participation, child rights, community engagement and advocacy.

To build such skills within the social service workforce, the social workers who were involved in the pilot received intensive training and coaching over the piloting phase. Yet, during implementation the need to further strengthen their capacity, specifically in areas related to child protection and child rights, became evident. This was particularly important because the promoted methods represented a shift away from how the national social service workforce usually approaches case management.

To respond to this, an assessment tool for the social service workforce was developed with the aim of deepening the understanding of gaps in capacity and skills. During 2020, results from the assessment will be used to inform planning and design of accredited professional development and training programs with a focus on areas where there are identified gaps. This will represent a shift away from support for ad-hoc capacity building to more consolidated approaches through the Government's training institutes and universities. Such sustainable solutions will be necessary to ensure a strong and capable workforce with the skills and knowledge necessary to support the effective and efficient implementation of the case management platform and other responsibilities pertaining to their role, as the system goes to scale.

Cross-sectoral governance structures must be enhanced at both the national and governorate levels, to ensure that models of a holistic nature can succeed. At the level of the UNICEF Programme, the Programme Management Group (PMG), comprised of representatives from the Ministries of Education, Health, Social Development, and the National Centre for Statistics and Information, acts as a steering committee for the programme. The PMG has been instrumental in resolving many obstacles in programme implementation; it has promoted more efficient cross-sectoral linkages and has facilitated the endorsement of more progressive interventions.

At the national level there are a number of cross-sectoral bodies that could be similarly effective in promoting child-centred approaches and UNICEF is therefore looking to engage these more actively to ensure maximum impact and synergies. As part of the work on the IECD Model, for example, a comprehensive governance structure has been proposed, which would build on reform of the existing cross-sectoral National Committee for Family Affairs to ensure holistic oversight of the ECD sector. The Committee is a high-level decision-making body that is chaired by the Minister of Social Development and has several sitting members, who are Undersecretaries in related ministries and entities. Reform of this influential body to become responsible for oversight of the ECD sector would be a positive example with regards to how different actors can work together at the national level. Similar examples exist at the sub-national level, where as part of the work on the cross-sectoral case management system, the protocols for collaboration amongst the cross-sectoral Child Protection Committees were revisited to facilitate work across sectors and thus promoted enhanced impact.

During 2020 UNICEF will continue to use its convening role to ensure further operationalization of such approaches.