

Update on the context and situation of children

In the two years since a new government took office, the Gambia's economy has rebounded, with growth exceeding 6½ per cent in 2018^[1]. Inflation has dropped to just above 6 per cent. However, the Gambia is one of seven African countries in 'debt distress'. This indicates shrinking fiscal space for the state budget and affects children and women, especially the most vulnerable, who rely on social services. The country faces rapid and unplanned urbanization (67.6 per cent of the total population resides in urban areas^[2]), resulting in increased child labour and violence against children, as well as pressure on social services. A recent analysis pointed to growing frustration among the population due to: poor communication, undermining public trust, and delays in implementing national development plans due to constant personnel changes.^[3] In addition, the Gambia is vulnerable to the effects of climate change, especially weather-related hazards such as drought, windstorms, flooding and sea-level rise.

The political situation remains stable, despite underlying tensions, and the Gambia's democratic reforms have benefited from political will and national ownership, as exemplified by the establishment of a national human rights commission and a constitutional reform commission tasked with drafting a new constitution by July 2020. However, enforcement of laws meant to protect children is weak. The 2019 United States "Trafficking in Persons" report downgraded the Gambia to Tier 3: for the second consecutive year the government did not complete any trafficking prosecutions. The same is true for other child-related laws, such as those addressing child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C).

Situation of children and woman, findings from the 2018 multi-indicator cluster survey (MICS) showed progress in certain areas compared to the 2010 MICS, but also highlight areas where backsliding has occurred; for example, in relation to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 (Zero Hunger). Although stunting and wasting among children has declined, rates in rural areas are consistently higher than the national average, and only 55.2 per cent of infants under six months of age are exclusively breastfed. For SDG 3, the recent MICS showed a decline in under-five mortality but increased neonatal mortality, and rural communities and poor households bear the brunt of these disparities. Neonatal and infant mortality rates are 31/1,000 and 41/1,000, respectively, meaning that 75.6 per cent of infant deaths occur during the first month after birth. Diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections are among the leading causes of illness, yet only just over half of children under age five who experience these illnesses were taken for treatment. The birth rate for adolescents aged 15–19 years declined to 67 from the 2010 level of 118; however, significant inequity exists by girl's education level – the highest birth rates occurred among the least educated girls.

Significant gains were also made in relation to SDG 4. The country has achieved gender parity and increased coverage for both preschool and basic education. Yet primary school completion rates dropped to from 75 to 66 per cent. Although quality education is a national priority, only 8.6 per cent of children aged 7–14 years have basic numeracy skills and just 12.4 per cent have basic literacy skills. Newly built schools tend to provide disability access, but most Gambian schools do not fully meet the needs of children affected by disability. In relation to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), both child marriage and FGM/C are reported to be on the decline, but rates remain high, calling for more attention to holistic approaches to girls' education. Forty-four per cent of women still believe that FGM should continue, although 92 per cent are aware that FGM is prohibited by law and around 51 per cent of girls under the age of 14 have undergone FGM/C – demonstrating the gap between knowledge, attitudes and practices. In spite of some progress, Gambian children are still vulnerable to several child-protection risks. Data indicate that 89.2 per cent of children under the age of 14 have experienced some form of violent discipline. Almost a quarter of mothers believe physical punishment is necessary to proper child-rearing, which may reflect broader social acceptance of violence: 49.9 per cent of women aged 15–49 years still believe that husbands are entitled to beat their wives.

Access to water and sanitation (SDG 6) has improved. However, the MICS found that only one third of households had a handwashing facility with water and soap. Seventy-three per cent of households use drinking water contaminated with *E. coli*, and 1 per cent of the population still practices open defecation (OD). This is a worrying trend given the country's rapid rate of urbanization. Child migration continues to be a key issue in the Gambia – a country of origin, transit, destination and return. Adult migration also impacts children who are left behind; some 13.4 per cent of children have at least one parent living abroad. Related to SDG 16 (Peace and Justice), birth registration rates have increased since the 2010 MICS. However, among those registered fewer than half of children under five (47 per cent) have an actual birth certificate. These findings show that despite notable progress, more actions and concerted efforts are needed by all stakeholders.

For the most part, the constraints on reaching vulnerable children can be traced to inadequate resources, which in turn depends on greater collective will. Now is the time to join forces to tackle inequity and inequality head-on by focusing greater investment and effort on reaching children being left behind.

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[1] International Monetary Fund, Country Report No. 19/277, 2019.

[2] UNICEF and Gambia Bureau of Statistics, Multi-Indicator Cluster Surveys for 2010 and 2018.

[3] Government of Gambia and United Nations in the Gambia, "Conflict and Development Analysis, the Gambia", 2019.

Major contributions and drivers of results

To accelerate action on global and regional goals related to reducing violence against children, improving equitable and sustainable access to education and reducing child deaths through immunization, UNICEF Gambia strengthened implementation of the "Nsa Kenno" ('We Can Do It') approach, in close collaboration with the Government and other development partners, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Within the context of the country programme, Nsa Kenno seeks to facilitate communication, participation, connection, interaction, and exchange among duty-bearers and the communities

To realize the right of every child in the Gambia to grow up in a safe and inclusive environment (KRC5), much more needs to be done – and urgently. UNICEF supported the newly established Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (MoWCSW) and stakeholders to establish a roadmap for a comprehensive case management system (CMS) to facilitate the identification, opening and management of child protection cases. Strengthening the evidence-based approach to child protection is crucial and needs support from all actors. Some 739 girls and boys who have experienced violence were reached by health, social work or justice/law enforcement services, promoting interoperable service delivery with the health sector. As a newly established ministry, MoWCSW plays a critical role in advancing and overseeing cross-sectoral coordination of children's issues, thus UNICEF Gambia has provided technical assistance to support the establishment of the new Children's Department. UNICEF also supported training for social agents, including community members, to increase awareness and ensure that cases are resolved and followed-up until satisfactorily completed. The new system will also compile and provide data to the national database as a tool for policymakers and implementers to address child protection issues. As part of establishing the CMS, UNICEF Gambia supported nationwide training of the social welfare workforce, facilitated by an expert from UNICEF's West and Central Africa Regional Office, on case management, reintegration and related tools. Addressing the risks faced by children on the move and the impact of child migration continues to be a critical issue. UNICEF co-chairs UN coordination on migration with the United Nations International Organization on Migration and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. UNICEF Gambia also works closely with community structures and the social welfare workforce to raise awareness and establish a 'second chance' centre within public schools.

Achieving a shift from norms and practices that perpetuate violence against children was another 2019 priority. UNICEF Gambia supported the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) to develop a safe school's strategy, initial implementation of which will receive a catalytic push from the UN Peacebuilding Fund.

Efforts to eliminate FGM/C and child marriage, in close collaboration with The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), continue to rely on strategic interventions targeting key populations, including children and adolescents. The FGM/C and child marriage programme strengthened coordination by setting up a national steering committee on these two issues to support programme coordination, implementation, monitoring, reporting and sharing of best practices and to provide technical guidance on lifesaving interventions. In addition, awareness-raising interventions were held in more than 10 communities, including 15 schools. At the community level, the stepping-stone initiative, 'mega-theatre', young couples' initiative and positive deviant approaches were used by various partners, including civil society organizations. Awareness-raising targets social norms in communities and social transformation in schools. Since laws banning the practice of FGM/C and child marriage have rarely been enforced in the Gambia, UNICEF supported training and orientation on the laws for law enforcement agents at the national and decentralized levels. The training increased both understanding of the law and capacity to apply it.

Law enforcement is a critical and integral part of a functioning child protection system. To increase access to justice, 23 regional-level law enforcement officers were trained and oriented on the community case management system, including tools for documentation. The training offered an opportunity to assess and review the current process and procedures used to enforce laws related to children in contact with the law. The training and support to decentralized structures also strengthened coordination among various law enforcement agencies at the regional level, which in turn resulted in a mixed group – including law enforcement officers and community members – for coordinating child protection issues such as abuse, exploitation and children on the move. This joint coordination mechanism also maximized the use of resources for documentation, monitoring and follow-up.

A new children's court was set up in Mansakonko (Lower River Region) with UNICEF support, bringing the total to four children's courts countrywide. The additional court will reduce a backlog of child-related cases and enhance the ability of

children in the region to access the justice system, as well as reducing travel times for child victims to attend court. UNICEF Gambia supported strengthened capacity for administration, data collection and reporting in three operational children's courts (in Upper River Region, West Coast Region and Kanifing Municipality) and provided technical and supply support to the new children's court in Mansakonko to help increase its coverage.

One element of leaving no child behind is that every child younger than five years should be registered at birth and have a birth certificate. To make this a reality, UNICEF strengthened the capacity of the Gambia's birth registration system through the provision of computers to enable digitalization of the birth registration system, including redesign of birth certificates to A4 size, improved tools and raising awareness among local authorities and communities about the birth registration system. In addition, the country's law on births, deaths and marriage is currently under review, in preparation for building an effective, reliable national civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) system, in collaboration with the World Bank and other partners. In addition, birth registration is being integrated into the immunization system with the development of a single register for both immunization and birth registration. This effort will improve access to birth registration in the Gambia, which has high immunization coverage.

Another priority for UNICEF Gambia in 2019 was to educate and empower girls and boys to exercise their rights. The office contributed to the establishment of the Children's National Assembly of the Gambia (CNAG) and supported the Children's Network on Transitional Justice to amplify children voices on national development issues and fulfilment of their rights. These efforts contributed to CNAG's presentation of a 'call to action' to the Government and the UN General Assembly. In addition, 180 children, adolescents and youth groups were trained in advocacy and public speaking through Holiday Camps.

To give every child in the Gambia a fair chance in life, UNICEF supports government efforts to reduce the number of out-of-school children (KRC3), through an equity-based approach, and achieved a significant result: the combined rate of children not enrolled in primary and lower secondary school declined from 8.6 percent to 4.9 per cent between 2018 to 2019. UNICEF also supported MoBSE to update the draft early childhood development (ECD) policy, which is expected to be approved in early 2020, and revitalize inter-ministerial coordination. UNICEF support in 2019 allowed some 4,120 children to receive basic individual learning and play materials and 60 schools to receive ECD kits and other school-level learning and play materials. While access to early learning and pre-school services for young children is improving, greater efforts are required in other areas, such as child care and protective environments. To sustain the gains made in reducing the number of out-of-school children, UNICEF also promoted 'second chance' education for vulnerable adolescents, especially girls, and continued to convene the UN Social Protection Thematic Working Group, which is part of the overall Human Capital Development Group co-chaired by UNICEF and the World Bank.

However, school completion rates progressively declined: from 88 to 59 per cent for primary school and 42 per cent in secondary school. With the removal of school fees and other levies, the most reported underlying factors are distance to school and the indirect costs of education. UNICEF's contribution to removing these barriers included community engagement to increase parental appreciation of the immediate and long-term benefits of education; high-level advocacy, including leadership of the Local Education Group; promoting education as a right, especially for the most disadvantaged; and cross-sectoral support through improvements to school WASH facilities to reduce hygiene-related absenteeism.

Working with development partners, UNICEF Gambia supported government efforts to develop and implement a coordinated social protection strategy by providing technical assistance to the Secretariat of Social Protection (under the Office of the Vice President), as well as the newly established MoWCSW. With support from the European Union (through the 'building resilience through social transfers' project), UNICEF reached 6,077 mothers with children under 1,000 days old with monthly cash transfers and education on infant and young child feeding for a period of 24 months. Currently being evaluated, the project's preliminary findings show positive child outcomes, including nutrition status.

During 2019 UNICEF continued to work with members of the National Assembly to build their capacity and advance the public finance for children (PF4C) agenda. The Assembly's Select Committee on Health and Children received UNICEF support to conduct community-based monitoring and PF4C and state budget reviews to strengthen accountability. All Assembly members received support to enable them to analyse the proposed 2020 budget through a child-rights lens.

To give every child in the Gambia a chance to survive, UNICEF and partners supported the Ministry of Health (MoH) to strengthen the health care system and launch integrated primary health care services, along with a comprehensive assessment of current services. The results will be used by the MoH to guide its future planning for achieving geographical equity and improving its response to the population's needs. Assessment results will also be used by the World Bank to guide its work on public health expenditure analysis, development of essential health service packages, the national health insurance scheme and results-based financing (for which UNICEF Gambia is collaborating with the World Bank and United

Nations World Health Organization (WHO).

Integrated community case management (iCCM) is key to functional primary health care systems, ensuring a continuum of care from community to health facility. To improve access to care and reduce treatment gaps for malaria, pneumonia and malnutrition UNICEF supported the development of an iCCM strategy and helped build the capacity of an additional 100 village health workers to properly manage childhood illnesses at the community level. Furthermore, in collaboration with the Global Health Partnership (H6), UNICEF supported the establishment of Centres of Excellence for maternal and newborn care in three of seven targeted facilities in 2019. Among the results of this process, 22 health workers have increased capacity to apply Kangaroo Mother Care, 20 were trained in integrated management of new-born and childhood illnesses and maternal and new-born death audits were carried out. To achieve behaviour change, UNICEF promoted the 4+4 key household practices, which were scaled up in two regions, reaching 1,260 households in 18 districts.

One of the surest ways to end unnecessary child deaths is through vaccinations (KRC1). To expand vaccine reach, UNICEF Gambia supported the construction of a new regional cold store and ongoing extension of the national cold room. The cold chain equipment optimization platform is supported by the Global Vaccine Initiative (GAVI), with the aim of procuring new, Grade A cold chain equipment for 80 facilities to increase national vaccine storage capacity. To ensure functionality, all cold chain equipment is overseen through quarterly preventative maintenance nationwide. As part of strengthening the health system –increasing access to and coverage of immunization services and reduce inequalities – construction of five new outreach sites was underway in late-2019 in areas (urban, peri-urban) where immunization coverage is relatively low, with support from UNICEF and GAVI. In collaboration with WHO and other partners UNICEF also supported introduction and roll-out of the human papilloma virus vaccine; by end-2019 more than 111,000 girls had been vaccinated. In addition, Meningitis A vaccine was introduced as part of routine immunization.

In partnership with the MoH, National Nutrition Agency and the United Nations World Food Programme, UNICEF Gambia supported nutrition screening for 64,286 children. Some 2,111 children with severe acute malnutrition (SAM) were registered for treatment. Of these, 1,908 (90.4 per cent) were successfully cured. To ensure sustainability, 25,037 mothers were trained to use mid-upper-arm circumference measurement to screen children for acute malnutrition. This is a critical step toward resilience and ensuring treatment in areas not covered by primary health care services. Additionally, guidelines for treating SAM were incorporated into the pre-service training curriculum for nurses, to ensure a sustainable option to costly in-service trainings. UNICEF also promoted key messages on optimal infant and young child feeding, using social media and radio.

Through the open defecation-free (ODF) task force, UNICEF supported the MoH, Ministry of Water Resources and Ministry of Environment to sign an inter-ministerial, costed ODF roadmap that defines actions and accountabilities of different stakeholders. A total of 9,800 people in 67 communities were empowered through the provision of information on good hygiene practices and ending OD through training, orientation sessions and community engagements, which resulted in 46 communities attaining ODF status. Furthermore, 165,264 people (including 72,724 children) gained access to safe water and 448 water points were chlorinated during 2019. Some 13,563 people (including 6,796 school children) gained access to improved sanitation through the construction of gender-separated VIP latrines in schools and sanitation promotion in communities. The gender-separated latrine design in schools was improved to include washrooms for girls and boxes to store sanitary pads, contributing to UNICEF's gender action plan. A total of 936 community structures, health care workers and key stakeholders learned to implement WASH in schools, health care facilities and communities. UNICEF also engaged with the climate-smart WASH project supported by African Development Bank (AfDB) and will begin GIS mapping in 2020 to serve as a basis for project implementation.

In the area of humanitarian response, UNICEF supported the Government response to natural disasters (hydro-meteorological windstorm) through a situation assessment and the release of WASH supplies, reaching 307 beneficiaries.

Cross-cutting: Partnerships and advocacy

U-Report Gambia was launched at the Third Pan-African Youth Conference held in Banjul in March to promote children's right to express their opinions freely (Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC) and as a safe space for children to access information, interact and engage on development issues. By end-2019, some 6,325 U-Reporters were registered – 44 per cent of whom are young people between aged 15-19 years.

UNICEF participation in 'parenting month' in June served as an entry point to urge National Assembly members to become advocates for the first 1,000 days of life – including advocacy for breastfeeding spaces and involvement by businesses in providing family-friendly policies for employees. Among the results achieved was new collaboration with Chartered Bank, which pledged to set up a breastfeeding space in one of its branches before end-2019. The 'World's Largest Lesson' was organized in 2019, in collaboration with MoBSE, providing an age-appropriate opportunity for children to learn about the

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CRC and SDGs – including a ‘boot-camp’ for children to gain public speaking skills. Training was conducted for regional education cluster monitors on the CRC, SDGs and U-Report, enabling them to provide support for school club coordinators across the regions.

Interactive discussions on the CRC, SDGs and U-Report were conducted on radio and television stations, with support from the private sector. Social media platforms were provided with ample awareness, information and educational materials on the SDGs and CRC, including 5,000 copies of the CRC in an easy-to-read version, creating wider reach across the country. UNICEF Gambia sponsored one child and a ministry official to attend the CRC@30 event in New York. Gambian children also led a nation-wide consultation on the “The Gambia We Want”, which was reflected in the mid-term review (MTR) of the current UNICEF country programme (2017-2021).

As stipulated in the common chapter of UNICEF’s Strategic Plan, UNICEF Gambia fully demonstrated the value of joint UN System initiatives, including: Nsa Kenno with UNDP, promoting the eradication of FGM/C with UNFPA, H6 for health system-strengthening and engaging in governance/leadership/juvenile justice issues through the joint peace building fund with UNFPA and UNDP. UNICEF chairs thematic groups such as the Local Education Group, human capital development and social protection. In addition, UNICEF built and strengthened partnerships with the AfDB, Qatar Development Foundation, Swiss Development Fund, United Kingdom Department for International Development, Italy’s Government and UNICEF National Committee and donors from Germany.

Cross-cutting: Human resource management and programme & operational excellence (KRCs 9 & 10)

The percentage of staff members that declared themselves ‘very satisfied’ to work at UNICEF rose to 67 per cent in 2019, from 33 per cent the previous year. The office continues to invest in staff career development; 80 per cent of staff members completed their individual training and all staff completed mandatory training. Group training was held on performance management and career development to support managers and staff.

Management held monthly meetings with staff and allocated responsibilities using the Table of Authority. Pre-established performance indicators were monitored against actual results and corrective actions taken as necessary. A portal was established to share common issues on transactions, significantly reducing the time required to process transactions.

A risk register was developed and implemented, and the office’s capacity to respond to a disruption of operations was tested by activating its business continuity plan. As of end-2019, eight civil society organizations had registered on the UN Partnership Portal, following training for more than 50 participants on the Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfers (HACT), integrating e-tools and sessions on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Improved connectivity – to ensure that staff members can carry out their work and reduce the office’s carbon footprint – was achieved through upgrading the ICT network connection and increased use of video conferencing. A greening committee was established to promote initiatives such as installation of LED lights, use of recycled bottles and configuring network printers for double-sided printing.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

The MTR provided a snapshot of areas of progress and drivers in relation to the country programme document. Of 21 indicators, 33.3 per cent met the target, 19 per cent were on track and the remaining 47.7 per cent were lagging behind or lacked data. The most stagnant indicators were related to behaviour change. To address this delay, a communication for development (C4D) strategy was developed and integrated as an essential component of programme delivery. UNICEF will continue to intensify the application of results-based management principles in its work, while strengthening systems for tracking performance.

The MTR confirmed the strategic value of encouraging local government and other stakeholders to pay greater attention to fulfilling the rights and needs of their youngest citizens and ensuring the latter’s participation in local decision-making. UNICEF will continue, through the Nsa Kenno approach, to work closely with the government and other development partners to localize the SDGs. One bottleneck noted by a 2018 report on the national development plan is the limited resources allocated to local authorities. The ongoing voluntary national review (VNR) process for the SDGs offers a promising opportunity to mobilize wider partnerships and to address this issue nationally. UNICEF and MoFEA staff leading the review attended the conference on national evaluation and VNR in November 2019. Action plans will be implemented, including children’s participation during the VNR process in 2020. Throughout the year, children showed strong willingness

and capacity to actively and meaningfully participate in all processes affecting their own development and that of the larger society, as demonstrated at the CNAG, when children presented their recommendations to the Government at the National Assembly.

The Gambia has acceded to most major international treaties, but still has not incorporated some international rights instruments into domestic law. Existing child protection policies are not fully implemented, pointing to a need for broader awareness of these policies and procedures across all decentralized structures. This was echoed by young representatives at the CNAG, especially in relation to child marriage, FGM/C and child labour. UNICEF will continue to play an active role in advocating for and providing technical support for planning, developing and supporting the social service workforce for child protection to strengthen enforcement of relevant laws.

Rapid urbanization was observed as an emerging challenge to addressing child rights issues such as child labour and a healthy environment. Promotion of child-friendly cities and communities could serve as an enabler for addressing multi-sectoral issues related to urbanization. To this end, UNICEF is exploring the possibility of establishing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Banjul City Council, led by the first female mayor (who successfully launched a local chapter of Elected Women and Territorial Leaders of Africa (REFELA) in 2019), and enhancing partnerships with UNDP and other development partners.

Publication of the MICS6 was a major cross-cutting focus for evidence-based advocacy gains achieved in 2019; however greater efforts are needed, especially the creation of a child protection information system to collect evidence on rampant violence against children.

UNICEF recognized the importance of partnerships during 2019, and continued to work closely with sister UN agencies with the overarching objectives of increasing the focus on results for children, especially in areas of child marriage and FGM/C; on CRVS, tapping into the large-scale World Bank investment in a social registry; universal health coverage; and full implementation of the business operations strategy and HACT. UNICEF also established close collaboration with the Gambian Chamber of Commerce to advocate for spaces for breastfeeding in establishments and businesses, calling on private firms to invest in family-friendly policies. In addition, UNICEF is currently exploring the possibility of establishing MOUs with the Peace Corp (on education and health) and the University of Gambia (nutrition and social services curricula), in addition to the Banjul City Council, which is expected to take place in early 2020.

The office will continue to promote use of the UN partnership portal for partner selection. Furthermore, collaboration with other UN agencies and partners will be enhanced to ensure synergy and efficiencies under the 'delivering as one' principle. Innovative measures will be used to obtain feedback from new staff after three months of appointment to identify immediate needs and challenges and incorporate the effective implementation of progressive supervision prior to the end-of-year appraisal. A review of the learning plan to support programme delivery and staff career aspirations will continue efforts to increase staff motivation and satisfaction. UNICEF Gambia will continue to support efforts to enhance UNICEF core values.

Looking forward, UNICEF will continue to follow the change pathways agreed to during the MTR, while sharpening its focus on integrated approaches to obtain key results for children in areas such as early childhood development (KRC3), integrated community case management (KRC1) and violence against children (KRC5). This endeavour will be further improved in 2020 by ensuring the participation and contribution of all key stakeholders, including children and youth, who are the leaders of the future as demonstrated clearly during 2019 by the CNAG, U-report and other platforms. The office will maintain its focus on C4D, developing partnerships, evidence-based advocacy and innovation. Technology for development initiatives are planned to continue collaboration on innovation between UNICEF and UNDP, in response to the country's development needs.

The U-Report initiative shows great potential to advance child rights, and could be explored further (such as through

real-time monitoring via Rapid Pro) in collaboration with UNICEF in Sierra Leone. UNICEF Gambia will also explore the potential for scaling up digital birth registration, and – to strengthen transparency, flexibility and accountability – the office will explore other methods of making payments to beneficiaries, such as mobile payments or virtual cash wallets. At the same time, UNICEF will continue to support the development of strong, effective institutions that respond to the demands of informed and empowered communities to realize the rights of all children in the Gambia.