In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region UNICEF supports programmes in 16 country offices covering 20 countries in MENA. Despite progress toward many social indicators in recent decades, inequalities between and within countries remain substantial. A wide range of country typologies[1] are represented in MENA, as are differing stages of demographic transition and complex political economies presenting diverse humanitarian challenges.

While children experienced improvements in their situation between 1990 and 2020 (e.g., declining child mortality and child marriage and increased attendance in primary education) by 2022 positive trends had begun to stagnate, or reverse, due to: COVID-19; stalled reforms; climate change; and/or protracted security, economic or political crises.

MENA has long had the highest number of verified grave violations of child rights in armed conflict: 32 per cent of all 290,000+ global violations, including killing, maiming and recruitment of child soldiers. In 2021 the UN Secretary-General reported that 36 per cent of all violations worldwide occurred in MENA.

UPDATE ON THE CONTEXT AND TRENDS

MENA’s current total population 530.8 MILLION

Nearly 36% ARE CHILDREN

50 MILLION CHILDREN need humanitarian assistance
Active hostilities, protracted conflict and political instability are a fact of daily life in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen. MENA also hosts one of the largest populations of refugees and internally displaced people globally.

MENA is warming faster than the global average. Climate change models foresee increased droughts, resulting in food insecurity and increased water stress for millions by 2025. The climate crisis is a child rights and equity crisis.

Exposure to violence, climate change and political instability put an ever-larger number of children at risk of losing access to essential health and nutrition services; quality learning opportunities; and access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene.

MENA economies are highly diverse and were affected differently by 2022 economic trends. GDP growth for oil exporters exceeded 6 per cent, while oil importers grew by just 4.5 per cent. All countries—particularly those most dependent on grain imports (Djibouti, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen)—experienced rising food prices due to the Russia-Ukraine war; this negatively impacted household spending on food, making children vulnerable to malnutrition. Moreover, the World Bank estimates that regional growth will fall to 3.5 per cent in 2023 as oil prices decline. Furthermore, several countries such as Lebanon, Egypt, Syria and Iran continue to face serious economic challenges and weakening currencies which are eroding household the purchasing power. During 2022 UNICEF advocated for addressing child poverty through efficient national protection systems and multipurpose cash/cash-plus programmes. UNICEF’s Regional Office (MENARO) contributed analysis to the 2nd Arab report on Multidimensional Poverty, showing that in middle-income MENA countries child poverty declined from 31 per cent (early 2010s) to around 24 per cent by 2029-20 but remained stagnant—at much higher levels—in low-income and conflict-affected countries.

By 2022 improvements in child survival were evident in MENA.

Under-five mortality DECLINED from 51 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2000 to 27 in 2021.

Relatively high rates of compliance with antenatal care (1 visit, 89 per cent; 4+ visits, 71 per cent) and skilled birth attendance (93 per cent) were key contributors to this achievement.

The number of ‘zero-dose’ children (never received a dose of diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis) reached 809,000, while 1.5 million were unprotected from measles, suggesting deterioration in child survival compared with the late 2010s.

Surveys among children under 24 months conducted from 2013 to 2019 found severe food poverty in several countries, particularly Egypt, Sudan and Yemen: 34 per cent of Sudanese children under two experience dire hunger. Stunting prevalence remained high in 2022, except in Egypt, where new data offered grounds for some optimism.

Overall, the environment in MENA countries offers few protections for children from violence, exploitation and abuse. Available data suggest that while severe, violent discipline of children has declined, eight in ten children report experiencing some form of violence at home.

* UNICEF MENA region includes the following countries: low income - Sudan, Syria, Yemen; middle income- Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, State of Palestine, Syria, Tunisia; high income- Gulf Area (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar Saudi Arabia, UAE) and Oman.
more than 1.31 million children were at risk of dropping out due to COVID and unlikely to return. Moreover, a 2021 joint World Bank/UNICEF/UNESCO report found that 40 per cent of children and adolescents enrolled in school prior to COVID closures were unable to continue learning due to lack of access to computers, exacerbating existing equality gaps and representing a catastrophe for the learning, skills development and economic future of millions of children and youth.

Gender parity in labour-force participation dropped sharply in both 2020 and 2021 as COVID-19-related school closures and other restrictions that forced women to leave their jobs.

During 2022 MENARO held several large-scale events to increase the visibility of children and adolescents and their needs and rights, including: a high-level meeting on ‘Learning, skilling and transition to decent work for young people’; a ‘Transforming education’ summit, and ‘Arab girls’ summit. The momentum created could rally governments, private sector, young people and bilateral partners to form a public/private/youth partnership aimed at developing a strategy for addressing bottlenecks in the transition from learning to decent work in many countries.

Progress was made on eliminating female genital mutilation (FGM); by 2021 the percentages of under 18 girls undergoing FGM had declined from 20 percent in 2014 to 14 percent.

Even before COVID19 nearly 15 million children between the ages of five and 14 were out of school throughout MENA, and nearly two thirds were unable to read with proficiency.

MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS AND DRIVERS OF RESULTS

The year 2022 was the first year of the regional office management plan (ROMP) 2022–2025. Closely aligned to UNICEF 2022-2025 Strategic Plan, the ROMP is designed to contribute to the five MENA accelerators:

- Strengthening Primary Health Care (PHC) service
- Improving adolescents’ learning and employability
- Addressing violence against children
- Scaling up UNICEF’s response to the climate crisis
- Expanding national social protection systems to reduce multidimensional poverty and vulnerabilities
In 2022, MENARO supported countries to strengthen: polio eradication efforts (Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Palestine and South Yemen), reaching nearly 15.8 million children; measles elimination and control (Syria and Yemen), reaching 3.5 million children; COVID-19 vaccine rollout, through integrated delivery of existing services (Sudan, Iraq and Yemen); mapping zero-dose and under-vaccinated children in five countries and developing outreach strategies (Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, Syria, Yemen); and strengthening immunization supply-chain systems, vaccine management and the capacity of national managers.

Support provided in five hotspots to develop nutrition response plans to improve young children’s diets, prevent malnutrition and scale-up care for children with wasting (Djibouti, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria and Yemen). Some 510,273 children under five with severe acute malnutrition were treated.

To contribute to accelerated action on PHC, MENARO supported eight countries to improve the quality of critical care for women, new-borns and children by scaling-up oxygen therapy systems (Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan and Tunisia). Support included guidance on integrating essential services, generating evidence on determinants of health and wellbeing among 10–24-year-olds and developing digital health initiatives. A strategic partnership between UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) strengthened commitment around mental health in MENA, resulting in the completion of national child, adolescent and maternal mental health surveys and the initiation of research on results of integrating mental health services into PHC in six countries (Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia).

Beyond the COVID-19 response, MENARO provided technical support to countries that experienced additional epidemics—including Congo-Crimea haemorrhagic fever, measles, cholera, polio, dengue, malaria and sporadic cases of mpox.

MENARO provided technical support to country offices across the region to advance efforts in: early childhood learning, integrating life-skills into teaching and learning, building inclusive, resilient education systems, ensuring data and monitoring in education and facilitating young people’s transition from learning to earning.

MENARO offered guidance to 11 country offices on the use of three new tools in education (Djibouti, Egypt, GAO, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen). Several MENA countries adopted teaching and learning practices enabling acquisition of life-skills for lifelong learning, employability, personal empowerment and active citizenship (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia). Building on the regional ‘life-skills and citizenship education’ framework, MENARO supported exchanges and peer-learning across countries, development of tools to measure life-skills and analyse lessons learned on integrating life-skills into teaching and learning.

To ensure continued learning during the pandemic, MENARO supported safe school operations in several countries and digital learning to address the digital divide and provide multiple learning pathways, especially for the most marginalized (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria).

To advance results on learning, skills and employability, in 2022 MENARO organized a high-level meeting on ‘Young people’s learning, skilling and transition to decent work’, bringing together more than 300 participants from 20 countries to exchange good practices and develop a shared vision of how to support young people’s learning-to-earning transition. National commitments to advance this agenda announced during the event will further inform country-level action.
Climate change has accelerated droughts and floods; changed water cycles; and caused sea-level rise, altering marine ecosystems. Environmental degradation, pollution and biodiversity loss are accelerating at unprecedented rates in MENA, affecting children not only today but into the future.

During 2022 these changes contributed to humanitarian crises in MENA (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Syria, Yemen), particularly cholera outbreaks that required targeted support in Syria and Lebanon. Support included development of training modules, delivery of capacity-building initiatives (Iraq, Gaziantep and Syria), multi-sectoral response plans and coordination of inter-country technical support and training on cholera prevention and management.

On climate change and water scarcity, MENARO provided direct technical support to all country offices for undertaking a ‘climate landscape analysis for children’ (CLAC). By year’s-end five country offices had completed their CLAC and developed clear recommendations for integrating climate/water-scarcity issues into their programming (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan); 10 more were underway.

MENARO also worked closely with UNICEF Headquarters (HQ) and the Egypt country office on preparations for COP27 and COY17, held in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt. With partners, MENARO organized pavilion events on the Declaration on Children, youth engagement and climate action and youth climate leadership, among others.

MENARO supported children’s right to protection from violence, exploitation and harmful practices in 19 countries by strengthening child protection systems and promoting protective behaviours, in line with SDGs 5 and 16. Regional action concentrated on generating new evidence (data, research and evaluation), strengthening stakeholders’ capacity and developing partnerships to generate political commitment to ending violence against women and children.

MENARO contributed to child protection in seven countries embroiled in armed conflict and multiple humanitarian crises (Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, State of Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Yemen). The main priorities in humanitarian action included mental health and psychosocial support, response services for children in need of care and protection and gender-based violence.

In partnership with the International Detention Coalition, United Nations High Commission for Refugees and International Organization on Migration, MENARO engaged systematically with eight governments in the region (Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sudan) to: develop better policies and practices for protecting children on the move; seek alternatives to detention; and ensure a continuum of care and protection, guided by country-specific evidence and international standards.

MENARO contributed to enhancing programmes and policies to end child marriage and FGM in Djibouti, Egypt, Sudan and Yemen. The Arab Girls Summit in Amman (10-12 October) hosted by Jordan’s National Council for Family Affairs, in cooperation with the League of Arab States, UNFPA, UNICEF and Plan International, brought together 50 girls from 18 countries, who proposed policy recommendations that were endorsed by Member States.
MENARO’s social policy and social protection team strengthened regional leadership on shock-responsive social protection, including humanitarian cash transfers. Twelve country offices received support to create cash-plus programmes, mainly to develop implementation strategies and cross-sectoral linkages with the nutrition and child protection sections for the ‘plus’ component. Support was also provided for programme monitoring and broad stakeholder engagement. MENARO also supported country offices to conduct cash feasibility assessments and, in Sudan, to design a structure to facilitate scaling up cash-transfer programmes.

To create a collaborative space on public finance for children (PF4C) within and across sectors, MENARO offered technical guidance to country offices on implementing the PF4C agendas. As a result, three country offices updated their PF4C strategies. A practical guide for developing office-wide PF4C action plans was also finalized in 2022. MENARO’s social policy and health and nutrition teams led the first detailed study of PHC financing in MENA, which stressed the importance of budget analysis and costing of PHC to promote its prioritization in national budgets.

During 2022 the ‘Whole of Syria’ (WoS) programme continued to provide leadership in WASH, nutrition, education and child protection, prioritizing areas where children were most vulnerable. Cross-border humanitarian assistance was delivered to 2.5 million Syrians in 2022 in 342 communities, in collaboration with 31 partners.

MENARO provided technical and quality assurance support to 10 UNICEF offices developing country programme documents (Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Palestine and Yemen). The RO facilitated the use of rights- and results-based management approach to ensure that risk-informed programming and cross-cutting issues were reflected in all CPDs. Additionally, MENARO provided technical oversight for completing situation analyses to UNICEF offices in Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait.
In 2022 MENARO supported completion of 25 evaluations of education, health, nutrition, water and sanitation and COVID-19-related programming in both development and humanitarian settings. To inform regional programming in the context of COVID-19, multi-county evaluations were finalized covering RCCE and gender, as well as a mid-term evaluation of ‘Education cannot wait’ in the WoS.

MENARO supported 14 country offices to plan and deliver humanitarian assistance to 50 million children in need and ensured adequate preparedness and response to both public health emergencies (mpox, cholera) and sudden upsurges of violence (Libya, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Yemen). Throughout 2022 additional support was provided to develop humanitarian action appeals; situation updates; and humanitarian planning, response and coordination through capacity-building and in-country missions. To facilitate real-time monitoring, MENARO assisted with the establishment of data systems and dashboards.

MENARO provided technical/advisory support to 16 country offices in accountability to affected populations (AAP) through a network of focal points. During the year 230 UNICEF staff and 140 partner staff from five countries participated in AAP training sessions.

MENARO completed and rolled out a regional programme strategy and guidance to advance regional accelerator results for children and support the global shift from ‘communication for development’ to ‘social and behaviour change’ (SBC) across the region. Enhanced coordination of resources and support to countries resulted in improved approaches under difficult conditions and increased vaccination uptake (Iraq, Sudan). Two rounds of COVID-related behavioural studies were conducted in 23 countries; data was triangulated with social listening to improve national responses.

A regional evaluation of RCCE for COVID-19 was completed, highlighting significant progress in coordination, research and community engagement and positive causal links between UNICEF-supported COVID-19 activities and SBC in Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco.

In preparation for the third Global SBC Summit, held in Morocco in December 2022, UNICEF MENARO and the American University in Beirut jointly organized several webinars on regional challenges to SBC and a session on ‘faith and norms in the region’. Thirty participants from MENA countries attended, presenting more than 20 abstracts.
MENARO supported country office efforts to strengthen systems and facilitate partnerships with and for young people to support their transition to a productive and engaged adulthood. A high-level meeting on young people’s ‘Learning, skilling, and transition to decent work’ provided a platform for engagement between government, private sector, civil society and young people to develop national voluntary commitments to address key obstacles to the transition in 18 MENA countries.

Participatory action research was carried out in five countries to bolster young people’s participation in climate change initiatives and support their participation in national delegations attending COP27 and other platforms. In addition, a new ‘young climate activist training module’ was co-developed by young people from six MENA countries and launched in September 2022. Partnership was enhanced with Gen-U through technical assistance for few countries.

MENARO’s adolescent development and gender teams partnered to support the roll-out of UNICEF’s global strategy on adolescent girls, including development of a regional selection process and technical support.

Increased investment in research and data—including participatory research and feedback mechanisms and country-specific situation analysis—to generate evidence on successful strategies for girl-focused and gender-equitable programming marked 2022. The COVID-19 gender evaluation helped to develop a regional roadmap for strengthening gender-focused approaches. Gender was highlighted during the regional ‘Learning-to-earning’ meeting, and gender in humanitarian action was strengthened in the area of emergency preparedness and localization strategies with women’s organizations.

MENARO launched a cohort of girl leaders in climate action, reaching over 30 girl leaders from eight countries, in partnership with Karama and the newly launched Wa’ed Network. A ‘Girls got game’ communication campaign was launched to disrupt gender stereotypes by highlighting successful female athletes.

MENARO partnered with International Step by Step to support gender-responsive parenting. With UNICEF Egypt the RO co-created global modules and two webinars for frontline service providers and assisted with roll-out in six countries (Syria, State of Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia and Iran).

MENARO supported evidence-generation by country offices during planning and implementation (over 250 analytical initiatives across 16 offices) through technical assistance, quality assurance and compliance with procedures that ensure ethical evidence-generation. Multiple indicator cluster surveys advanced in the region, especially through data collection in Yemen and preparatory work in Qatar, Sudan and Tunisia. MENARO collaborated with UNICEF’s Office of Research to strengthen the capacity of relevant country office staff in research management and quality assurance.

Fourteen analytical initiatives contributing to regional knowledge on children and young people were undertaken in partnership with other UN agencies and regional entities (WHO, ILO, UNDP, League of Arab States and UNESCWA), including: flagship studies on young peoples’ transition from school to work, monitoring social spending, assessment of child-sensitive social protection responses in MENA and COVID-19 vaccine uptake. Results were presented and discussed in regional forums.
UNICEF continued to focus on the impact of armed conflict on children’s lives and well-being, while also addressing emerging issues facing children and families in the region. MENARO published over 75 statements, news notes and press releases, as well as conducting more than 80 media interviews on international and regional channels and continued to be an essential and trustworthy source of information for the public. MENARO balanced the response to conflict and COVID-19 with tackling new priorities—particularly climate change and its impact on children.

The RO maintained its digital platforms, reaching over 1 million followers across various channels.

MENA country offices received US$978 million during 2022, but funding was highly concentrated: Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen received 90 per cent of these funds. The RO raised US$28.2 million, up from US$21.6 in 2021, to support the ROMP.

UNICEF continued to co-chair the ‘No lost generation’ initiative, advocating for the education, protection and provision of psycho-social support for Syrian children in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey.

The major partnership PROSPECTS continued its successful implementation in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Sudan. MENARO’s partnership team continued to monitor implementation and support the programme, while preparing for its next phase (PROSPECTS 2.0), in collaboration with HQ, country offices, the Netherlands and other partners funding initiatives for young refugees and asylum seekers.

All UNICEF offices ramped up outreach to the private sector regarding both funding and influence. Most of UNICEF’s income in MENA comes from Gulf countries; ground-breaking results for private-sector fundraising were achieved in 2022–nearly US$100 million. Plans to transform this result into a sustainable private-sector income stream were underway in late 2022.

UNICEF was one of the leading UN agencies contributing to development of a regional business operations strategy for 2022–2024, in support of more effective programme delivery.

As part of its annual management plan, MENARO continued to explore options for greater business efficiency, arranging tailored training for managers in creating a collaborative environment that recognizes and motivates performance.

Dedicated webinars for the region on ‘improving eco-efficiency’ and ‘accessibility in UNICEF offices’ took place throughout the year as a result of commitment by MENARO’s management to increase UNICEF’s greening footprint and accessibility in programmes and all UNICEF premises.

MENARO had completed 516 recruitment cases (for temporary and full-time national and professional posts) in 62 days as of end-November 2022.
Given the volatile and complex operating environment in MENA, the newly established risk management unit coordinated globally and with country offices to improve the emergency risk management policy framework and safeguard against risks. The risk management unit provided capacity building and technical support to country offices, which in turn achieved all key indicators for risk assurance in 2022, managing US$487.5 million in cash transfers to 949 implementing partners.

MENARO also organized a ‘Global Workshop on Risk Management’ in Amman. The workshop confirmed that in the future, risk management must be treated as a high priority and receive stronger high-level support, better systems and increased resources for risk management.

In 2022 US$920 million worth of supplies and services were received by MENA countries, including programme supplies channelled via regular procurement services and the Global Vaccine Alliance. Supply-chain strengthening and ensuring emergency response capacity were key priorities.

MENARO supported seven country offices on a wide range of supply functions (Algeria, Lebanon, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen). Cold-chain equipment valued at over US$2.5 million was delivered to 10 countries (Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Syrian AR, Tunisia, Yemen). Some 18.4 million bed-nets were delivered to and distributed in Sudan under a joint project for strengthening the health system and scaling-up malaria prevention and treatment.

A country office scorecard was introduced to facilitate monitoring of supply operations and inform systems-strengthening interventions. The vaccine procurement practitioners exchange forum convened 12 countries for knowledge, experience sharing and capacity development. High-level government visits to UNICEF’s Supply Division, country missions, the supply network meeting and the global supply meeting further enhanced supply chain understanding and delivery.

MENARO support to country offices for maintaining an agile and secure ICT infrastructure through migration to Cloud One progressed as scheduled, bringing 15 offices to the new platform by end-2022 (Algeria, Egypt, GAO, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, MENARO, Morocco, Oman, SoP, Syria, Sudan and Tunisia).

Fifteen VSAT sites were successfully shifted to the new service provider, Marlink, resulting in an approximately 50 per cent reduction in monthly recurring costs and fully optimized performance. Four sites in Syria were not included.

MENARO promoted and supported country offices to implement digitally enabled solutions through the technology for development governance framework, to strengthen their approach to assessing and implementing appropriate digital solutions for programmes.

In 2022 MENARO supported all country offices to ensure that security measures complied with security risk management (SRM). The new UNICEF compliance assessment tool was used at country and field offices to assess the residual vulnerabilities, security procedures, mandatory training, premises, vehicles and alignment with SRM. MENARO supported country offices with focused analysis and supplementary funds from EMOPS to enhance physical security.
Strong partnerships within and outside the region

Given the great diversity of programmes in the region, a strategic approach to partnerships is required to leverage the influence of partners and donors and mobilize resources.

MENA continues to be highly strategic for governments in the neighbourhood and abroad. Its geo-political position allows COs in the region to have strategic conversation with Embassies, IFIs and other multilateral actors around child rights issues and humanitarian action.

This year UNICEF continued to seek and build partnerships both outside and within the region. Within MENA and given the effective presence of UNICEF in several High-Income countries in the region, we worked to get more support from the private sector in the Gulf. Those strategic partnerships had an impact that went beyond the borders of the region, and into Africa and Latin America (some examples are EAA/Educate a Child based in Qatar, DP World, Al Ghurair Fund based in Dubai, and the Crown Prince Court in Saudi Arabia). The challenge lies in the prioritization of the different private sector engagement opportunities, given the limited resources at the regional and country levels. A stronger focus for innovative integrated (private and public sector) country approaches for resource mobilization will further enhance value-based partnership with private sector.

Challenges related to donor conditionalities continued during 2022, especially in certain countries. A more consistent, intentional and strategic approach to risk management is required to develop solutions for the major donor-related risks identified: excessive reporting requirements, restrictions on use of funding and increasing requirements related to risk-management, environmental and social safeguards and donor visibility.
Youth unemployment is of great concern to governments in the region, imposing social cohesion risks which are already high in MENA. Addressing this issue requires multi-sectoral action on both sides of the labour market (building human capital and creation of employment and entrepreneurship opportunities), accompanied by actions that help young people make the transition from learning to decent work. Partnerships with other UN agencies, governments, the private sector and young people is the most holistic and effective way to address these challenges and a valuable entry point for leading the way on integrated UN work at the programmatic level.

Climate change and water scarcity in the region

The issue of transboundary ground and surface waters caused by the lack of clear treaties and monitoring systems is beyond UNICEF’s mandate. However, UNICEF must continue to assess and manage this risk and its advocacy with other UN agencies and government counterparts stressing the importance of access to clean water for child health and development. UNICEF must also continue to support water management policies at national level.

UNICEF has laid a solid first step regarding the accelerator on climate change and water scarcity programming through the roll out of Climate Landscape Analysis for Children across the region and has advanced on engagement of youth on climate with huge success. UNICEF has established strategic alliances with key regional organisations including the Arab league and the UNESCWA enabling us to advance the child-focused agenda on climate including active participation in the COP processes.

Climate finance is often complicated, especially with accredited entities of the major multilateral climate funds. Thus, UNICEF globally, needs to accelerate efforts to become accredited with the Global Climate Fund and African Climate Change Fund and hire staff with climate finance experience and expertise in applying for multilateral funds.

The importance of transition from learning to earning

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Addressing public health emergencies

The region experienced eight public health emergencies highlighting the need to focus on addressing multiple health threats through strengthening primary health care systems including focus on prevention, preparedness, detection, response and community-based approaches. Leveraging experiences and resources from COVID-19, ensuring resilient systems, including the use of behavioural data and community systems are not only essential for protecting the health of most vulnerable groups, but also for mitigating against the devastating consequences of outbreaks on children. Furthermore, health systems need to be linked to determinants of health such as the economy, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), nutrition and education.

Coordinated nutrition response in the region

Programming and response must address the region’s diverse context, ranging from hotspot countries with high undernutrition (Djibouti, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, Yemen) to more affluent countries with rising overweight and obesity. Strengthening partnerships and coordination with other UN agencies (WHO, FAO and the UN World Food Programme) which we are pursuing is critical to supporting an effective, coordinated nutrition response in countries. The role of government in spearheading action on all forms of malnutrition is essential.
Early learning and digital education platforms

Fundraising for early childhood development and early learning is challenging. This stimulated a search for alternative modalities, such as results-based financing, to expand pre-primary education. Morocco and Tunisia are part of the global ‘Five million futures’ initiative led by HQ, aiming to contribute to increasing school readiness opportunities.

Integrated packages are critical to supporting early childhood development and education and it is essential to adapt them to socio-cultural contexts. However, this requires time and investment in human and financial resources, including active engagement with the government authorities, to ensure continuity and sustainability.

UNICEF will continue to manage the risk of disruption of education due to insecurity, political instability, and health outbreaks (among other factors) which requires exploring viable alternatives: including digital platforms, use of low-cost, low-tech remote or hybrid solutions to ensure learning continuity, especially for the most marginalized children.

Prioritization and focus on strategic investment in data

A wide range of data initiatives are taking place globally and within MENA; one lesson learned in 2022 was the need to prioritize, focusing on strategic investments that reflect UNICEF’s comparative advantage. MENARO is rolling out country-level ‘Light data action planning’ to complement more in-depth data diagnostics, drawing on lessons from its support for research and the need for accountability and progress monitoring. This should improve coordination among different programme sections and their country-level partners on data work that spans across sectors, helping to mobilize regional and HQ support.

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