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ANNUAL REPORT 2023

UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office

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CONTEXT AND TRENDS UPDATE[1]

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The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a region of contrasts. It is home to a culturally diverse group of low, middle- and high-income countries. Child poverty remains high in most countries, ranging from 16 per cent in Egypt to 76 per cent in Yemen, and less than half of the children have access to social protection, hindered by low public financing for such programs. Inequalities between and within countries are substantial, and this gap is widening.

In 2023, some MENA countries flourished while others experienced complex humanitarian crises that took a terrible toll on the lives of children and families. There were devastating earthquakes in Syria and Morocco, floods in Libya, the large-scale conflict across all of Sudan (creating the world's largest child internal displacement crisis), and the ongoing tragic situation in Israel and the State of Palestine. Country offices and the regional office in Amman had to respond to the needs of children in very varied contexts requiring a high degree of program flexibility, solid contingency planning and preparedness and a high level of attention to duty of care for staff. The scope of such crises has inevitably impacted UNICEF's work and the region's progress toward child-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Through it all, the UNICEF MENA Regional Office (MENARO) and 16 country offices continued to deliver results for children.[2] In 2023, UNICEF along with its partners met most of the immediate needs of the most vulnerable children, while delivering programmes, advocacy, and support to defend the rights of children and young people in varying circumstances and help them fulfil their potential. The dedication of country and regional office staff was outstanding, with teams delivering results in unimaginably challenging conditions more particularly in Sudan, the State of Palestine, and Yemen involving the loss of family members, multiple relocations and evacuations. For MENARO, protecting staff security and well-being was a significant focus and achievement.

In many MENA countries, children continue to lack protection from widespread violence, exploitation and abuse. Migration and displacement fuelled by increasing conflict, recent earthquakes and the effects of climate change are deepening child protection issues. Violence against children is occurring not only in conflicts but across the region in stable contexts.

Eight out of 10 children (aged 1-14) experiencing violent discipline at home.

Child marriage persists, with 15 per cent of women aged 20-24 married or in union by the time they were 18, with girls in Iraq, Yemen and Sudan most affected.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is still happening in Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Sudan and Yemen, although it is declining.

Seven situations of children and armed conflict in the MENA region are on the UN Security Council's agenda due to grave violations of child rights.

Before the pandemic, at least 15 million children in the region between the ages of 5-14 were out of school and nearly two-thirds of children were unable to read with proficiency[3]. In 2023, the region's ongoing learning crisis deepened, especially in conflict affected areas.

The war in Sudan alone has deprived almost 19 million school-age children (over 90 per cent of school-age children) of their right to education. Sudan now has the largest proportion of children not going to school in the world.

Most schools remain shuttered, leaving well over 90 per cent of the country's 19 million school-age children with no access to a formal education.

Most teachers have not been paid full salaries since the outbreak of war, and education supplies have been looted.

Approximately 10 per cent of schools are being used to shelter displaced children and families. Without urgent intervention, the learning crisis will become a generational catastrophe and a threat to development across the region.

MENA has the highest youth unemployment rate in the world: almost 1 in 3 young people (aged 15-24) are not in employment, education, or training, with young women particularly disadvantaged at a staggering 41 per cent rate. Improving young people's transition from learning to earning is an urgent priority.

Newborn deaths are declining, but remain high in Djibouti, Sudan and Yemen driven by recent crises, conflicts, and ongoing issues, such as poverty.

In 2021, 27 children out of every 1,000 in MENA died before their fifth birthday, compared to 51 in 2020.

For a third of MENA countries, under-5 mortality is tied to wealth inequalities, and strengthening social protection remains a key focus.

Algeria, Djibouti, Iraq, Sudan, and Yemen are now off-track to meet the SDG neonatal mortality target, and Sudan, Djibouti, Yemen, Algeria, Iraq, Libya and Morocco are yet to reach the SDG target to reduce maternal deaths to fewer than 70 per 100,0000 live births.

Child immunization coverage has been relatively high, but children in Syria, Yemen and Sudan are least likely to be vaccinated.

Overall, 698,000 children are classified as zero-dose,[4] and 1.4 million are unprotected from measles. Outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases are increasing.

Millions of children in MENA do not have enough to eat or are not eating healthily, leading to a growing nutrition crisis.

One in four children (6-23 months) suffer from severe child food poverty.

Children in Djibouti, State of Palestine, Sahrawi in Algeria, Sudan, Syria and Yemen experience high levels of food insecurity and under-nutrition.

Overall, 10 million children are stunted (although rates have been declining since 2000), 5.7 million are wasted (ranging from 1 per cent in Yemen to 16 per cent in Sudan), and 19.5 million have anaemia.

The region is also facing a growing obesity crisis, reflecting a triple burden of malnutrition in the region.

MENA is one of the most water-scarce regions in the world.

Nine out of 10 children live in high or extremely high water-stress countries.

Climate change is increasing the frequency of extreme heat and droughts.

Access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services in homes, schools, and health care facilities varies, with the lack of access most acute in Yemen, Sudan and the State of Palestine.

In 2023, funding from public donors increased. However, most donor funding is highly earmarked, and the lack of flexible funding is an increasing concern. Donor conditionalities around funding have risen significantly in response to the region's many emergencies, making fundraising for specific countries more difficult.

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MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS AND DRIVERS OF RESULTS

Throughout 2023, MENARO worked with country offices on six accelerated action areas in line with the 2022-2025 UNICEF Strategic Plan and provided expertise on key issues including **advocacy, social behaviour change, community engagement, gender, resource mobilization, monitoring and research.**

Health

In 2023, MENARO protected the health of children caught up in the region's many emergencies while providing robust expertise to country offices to strengthen primary health care (PHC) systems aimed at improving maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health services, including immunization.

A strategic partnership between UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) secured commitment and funds to integrate mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into PHC, resulting in Egypt and Jordan adopting a two-year cross-sectoral workplan, and implementation research in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya and Saudi Arabia. Ten country offices delivered MHPSS programming, advocacy and policy support, and MENARO established an inter-agency MHPSS capacity-building partnership with regional actors.

MENARO provided technical assistance on a regional roadmap to eliminate mother-to-child transmission of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), syphilis and hepatitis, and assessed triple elimination in humanitarian contexts. The regional office also provided technical support to 14 countries to implement an innovative tool that tracks maternal and newborn mortality and produces action plans.[5]

To support young people's participation in decision-making, MENARO worked with the regional Youth Advisory Group and international researchers to develop substantive policy recommendations on adolescent health, presented later at the Arab Youth Forum in Tunis. Also at the forum, MENARO worked with young people to release a first-of-a-kind, multisectoral report on young people's adolescent health to increase political and financial commitment on the issue.

Despite challenging operating environments, successful UNICEF-supported child immunization campaigns led to a 13 per cent decrease in zero-dose children, and to over 11.3 million children in five countries being protected from polio and measles. MENARO also supported seven country offices to establish gender-responsive and behaviourally informed immunization programmes and provided technical support to strengthen Iraq's immunization supply chain.

Iraq, Syria, Yemen, the State of Palestine, Morocco and Jordan country offices were supported on behavioural data analyses and application of human-centred design processes to deliver locally tailored behaviour change efforts to improve demand for immunization and health services. During 2023, MENARO's leadership in applying social and behaviour change approaches to advance health goals in MENA was featured in global UNICEF publications and in international health conferences in Bangkok, South Korea and Iran.

MENARO also supported Lebanon to successfully end its cholera outbreak, responded to acute watery diarrhoea/cholera outbreaks in Iraq and Yemen, and provided oral cholera vaccines to 5 million people in Sudan and Syria.

MENARO was successful in raising funds for country offices, resulting in US$5 million to procure traditional vaccines in Sudan and Syria, nearly US$15 million from the Gavi Equity Accelerator Fund for Sudan, Syria and Yemen, US$8.5 million for integrating COVID-19 vaccinations into routine immunization in Egypt, State of Palestine, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, and US$46 million for State of Palestine and Yemen from the Pandemic Fund. Investments of more than US$14 million were made for improving oxygen therapy in seven countries, protecting the lives of 431,000 newborns and children.

Preventing and Treating Malnutrition

MENARO provided extensive nutrition-related technical and capacity-building assistance to all five emergencies as well as to the ongoing crises in Yemen, Egypt and Lebanon's refugee response.

In 2023, 10 country offices were implementing strategies and programmes to prevent all forms of malnutrition in young children. UNICEF programmes reached 5.8 million children with preventive services and over 680,000 children with wasting treatment in high wasting hotspot countries (Djibouti, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria and Yemen). UNICEF Sudan's achievement of screening over 4 million children for malnutrition, and providing nutrition supplies to 250,000 children, including in conflict zones, merits particular attention. At the moment of writing this report, the nutrition situation of children is particularly worrying in the Gaza strip and in Sudan, both at the verge of famine.

Egypt, Lebanon and Sudan were supported in developing their national nutrition strategies, infant and young child feeding guidelines, and the first 1,000-day package. Egypt's 2023-2030 national food and nutrition strategy was launched in October 2023. Technical support was provided to Egypt, Lebanon, Sudan, and Yemen on salt iodization in collaboration with the Iodine Global Network.

As a result of MENARO's advocacy, technical and capacity-building, country offices in Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, State of Palestine, Syria and Tunisia began supporting the integration of early childhood development services into Primary Health Care (PHC), and four countries integrated anaemia prevention into antenatal care. To address increasing adolescent obesity, MENARO supported five country offices to implement nutrition programmes, including behaviour change support.

Responding to the growing malnutrition crisis in the region, and as a step towards strengthening the collaboration among UN agencies, UNICEF led the process of developing a Regional Nutrition Collaboration Framework involving Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP), WHO and UNICEF which was launched in August 2023. This framework is vital for building synergies and leveraging all stakeholders' influence, expertise, and resources to address the high levels of malnutrition in the region.

MENARO mobilized US$6.3 million to respond to the deepening nutrition crisis. With MENARO's technical support, Sudan and Yemen developed costed scale-up plans to address child wasting and mobilized US$50 million to implement these plans.

Skills, Learning and Employability

Significant support for policy enhancement, innovative programming, and strategic partnerships continued to enable MENA countries to keep building inclusive, resilient, flexible education systems capable of responding to shocks and humanitarian crises while promoting the continuity of learning.
Efforts were directed towards providing learning and education in emergency settings, supporting emergency preparedness, and enhancing contingency and response plans. Digital platforms, designed to operate both offline and online, were a significant tool for providing flexible learning.

MENARO continued to accelerate action on youth unemployment by emphasizing the crucial link between skills development and work. The regional office organized several knowledge exchanges to promote the learning-to-earning agenda, such as the Life Skills Learning Event attended by seven MENA and eight Eastern and Southern African countries. MENARO supported Morocco and Egypt, two countries that champion UNICEF's adolescent girl strategy, to share best practices on gender-transformative approaches. The regional office also secured an agreement to extend PROSPECTS –a programme focused on young people's learning to earning in refugee contexts (refugees and host communities) – for another four years in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Sudan.

To strengthen teaching practices, MENARO partnered with Cambridge Education to provide technical assistance to Iraq to design and implement the country's first national learning assessment system. Collaborative research with country offices also resulted in regional guidance for educators on catering to diverse learners, including children and young people with disabilities. To ensure education policymakers and planners have the evidence they need to improve learning, MENARO continued to support countries in developing national educational management information systems (EMIS). In collaboration with the Global Partnership for Education, UNESCO, and WFP, MENARO supported Yemen and Syria in developing an EMIS, and the collection of school-level data and analysis for policymakers and planners.

Child Protection

The regional office supported country offices to expand and diversify efforts to strengthen child protection systems and to protect children from violence and harm in increasingly complex development and humanitarian settings. Programmes to prevent violence against children at home, in schools and online continued in 12 countries through safe-school models, parenting programmes and case management.[6] In Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia, research into service integration began, which will be used to co-design combined national services that maximize opportunities to protect children's well-being.

Efforts to end child marriage and FGM continued. MENARO stepped up research and technical support to address the social and gender norms and behavioural drivers that underpin both violations. An IPSOS (market research company) commissioned study on the behavioural drivers of key child protection issues will be used in Djibouti, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen to strengthen social and behavioural change as well as community engagement approaches on FGM, child marriage and violence against children. Research on how harmful gender norms, behaviours and inequalities impact child protection was conducted in Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon, which will inform training and supervision for social workers. In Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, support was provided to advocate for, and strengthen the application of social and behavioural change approaches to address child protection issues, including online violence in high-income countries.

MENARO remained steadfast in its commitment to gender equality, supporting country offices in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen to develop advocacy strategies to address the growing backlash against gender rights. With the Global Center for Equal Nationality Rights, MENARO advocated for a unified position on gender-equal nationality laws among Gulf countries, something that is central to the realization of women's and children's rights.

In the State of Palestine and Sudan, partnerships were established with women-led organisations to provide tailored support for adolescent girls. Refugee children and their families were supported through a partnership with MENARO and UNHCR to support the inclusion of refugees in host countries' national systems. Programmes for children on the move were implemented in Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, in collaboration with UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) focusing on joint advocacy for inclusive child protection services, case management and lifesaving interventions at point of identification and disembarkation across Mediterranean migration routes.

MENARO provided technical advice to seven countries considered situations of children and armed conflict (CAAC) by the UN Secretary General: Iraq, Israel and the State of Palestine, Lebanon, Libya, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

In line with Member States agenda for CAAC, UNICEF contributed to document grave child rights violations and advocated publicly and privately with parties to the conflict to respect children's rights and international humanitarian law.

MENARO, in collaboration with UN and NGO partners, contributed to the implementation of 4 out of 7 action plans to end child recruitment in the region, supporting training of key stakeholders and design of reintegration programmes. Advocacy was also carried out with listed parties that have not put in place measures to improve the protection of children to get them to do so.

MENARO also increased advocacy efforts for the safe and voluntary repatriation of children of alleged foreign fighters in North-East Syria and was involved in designing reintegration programmes in four MENA countries.

The Climate Crisis

To accelerate action on the climate crisis for children and young people, MENARO played a central role in monitoring MENA country office progress, providing technical support and sharing regional knowledge and good practices. MENARO's support was key in producing 11 country-specific Climate Landscape Analysis for Children (CLAC) reports,[7] which provide clear recommendations for climate-focused programming at the country level.

MENARO provided vital technical assistance for country offices to support the at-scale shift to climate-aware programming. As part of this country level support, MENARO also participated in the multisectoral, multi-partner regional "Water Scarcity Initiative", led by FAO and the League of Arab States. The key output of the initiative in 2023 was the development of a successful multi-partner proposal that secured funding for climate-risk informed water scarcity actions for five UNICEF Country offices.

Considerable progress was made to ensure young people's voices on the climate crisis were heard. MENARO developed a regional climate change youth engagement strategy which has led to stronger partnerships at the national level with climate activists. This has already made an impact, for example, at the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) held in Dubai, young people participated in negotiation and climate activism. The representation of young women was also reinforced through a partnership with the Wa'ed girl's network.

Supporting WASH in humanitarian crises was also a major focus in 2023. MENARO played a central role in supporting emergency WASH responses in Lebanon, Libya, the State of Palestine, Sudan, Syria and Yemen plus cholera/acute watery diarrhoea outbreaks in Djibouti, Iraq, Sudan and Yemen. MENARO supported country office WASH teams through deployments, both in-person and remote, and continuous technical assistance. This included delivering a joint health, WASH and social behaviour change capacity-building programme for regional trainers to ensure an efficient, integrated cholera response.

Social Protection and Social Policy

UNICEF continues to be a leading actor in child sensitive social protection and social policy reforms in the region. MENARO mobilised regional expertise and provided in-depth technical assistance to strengthen national social protection and public finance systems for children in countries such as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia. Significant progress was made when Tunisia expanded its Universal Child Benefit to cover 18 per cent of children (around 550,000 children), and Oman launched a domestically financed Universal Child Grant that is expected to cover 1.3 million children. With International Labour Organization (ILO), WFP, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) MENARO jointly coordinated the scale-up of the TRANSFORM Arab Region initiative which aims to build inclusive, shock-responsive social protection systems in Jordan, the State of Palestine, Tunisia, Yemen.

MENARO also led capacity-building initiatives for country offices on disability and gender-inclusive social protection systems, including training on reducing the risk of gender-based violence in humanitarian cash transfer and social protection programmes.

To respond to emergencies in Libya, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Sudan and Syria, MENARO supported the expansion of Humanitarian Cash Transfers. By the end of 2023, nearly 450,000 people in Gaza had benefitted from UNICEF-provided cash assistance and top-ups. In Yemen, UNICEF continued the Unconditional Cash Transfer programme benefiting 9 million people. In Sudan, this benefited 50,000 pregnant or breastfeeding women and 250,000 family members. This work included support for 10 country offices to complete critical preparedness tasks, including contracting standby financial service providers. As a result of these efforts, in Syria, the first cash payment to affected families was made within 72 hours, and in Gaza cash payments to families were delivered within six days of the conflict's start.

MENARO drove regional efforts to link humanitarian cash transfers and social protection systems by leading a coalition task force on the issue. The regional office also developed guidance for country offices on strengthening cash transfer monitoring, risk management and behaviour change. Innovative work was done in the State of Palestine to design and roll out a post-distribution cash monitoring tool to collect recipients' feedback to improve the cash response. Cash transfer programmes in Lebanon, Syria and Tunisia were also peer-reviewed for risk management.

Closing Evidence Gaps

UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) programme made major advances in 2023 with the completion of the Yemen MICS 2022-2023 – the first national data for a decade – and survey work was completed in Qatar and Tunisia. Progress was made on child poverty measurement with the publication of the Second Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report, which includes data on disability and gender. By the end of 2023, MENARO and partners had completed 14 major studies, helping to close knowledge gaps among children and young people in the region. Social listening efforts complemented on-ground data collection and community feedback during several emergencies to provide a nuanced understanding of public perceptions, concerns, misinformation and rumours.

Resource Mobilization

MENARO continued to intensify its efforts to expand and deepen partnerships with the private sector. The region is exploring new forms of partnerships in the area of technical non-financial partnerships with mobile network operators and business associations, with partnerships forged in Egypt, Kuwait, Oman and Tunisia. To further diversify funding sources, digital individual fundraising was accelerated, raising more than US$5 million. With UNICEF HQ, US$100 million in flexible humanitarian funds was raised to respond to the region's major emergencies. MENA continues to be a strategic region for official development assistance from Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries, however the concentration of funding for the region is on emergencies. This trend is also followed by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, who have also provided financial support to emergency response in the region.

Supplies and Logistics

MENARO facilitated the delivery of over US$796 million in goods and services across the region in 2023. In addition, MENARO conducted carried out an in-depth analysis of supply emergency preparedness in the State of Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Iran and Yemen, which fed into a regional contingency plan. Localization was high on the agenda with a regional market survey being conducted for critical supplies, supported by supplier conferences to raise awareness and engage local producers, resulting in regional Long Term Agreements (LTAs) being established for critical supplies that are already serving ongoing emergencies.

Security, Risk Management and Staff Well-Being

For MENARO, protecting staff welfare and security in multiple, rapidly changing and deteriorating humanitarian situations was a significant focus. MENARO provided country offices with technical support and strengthened risk governance structure, including with support to the Yemen CO establishing a risk management unit. Regular security updates were provided as well as additional funds to enhance security measures. Staff duty of care was prioritized through additional support and events on psychological safety.

Humanitarian Action

In 2023, UNICEF responded to crisis-affected populations by: 1) contributing to end the cholera outbreak in Lebanon and providing critical vaccines and other life-saving assistance in response to cholera outbreaks in Sudan and Syria; 2) providing access to education and inclusive programming for children with disabilities and those on the move (through the Learning Passport platform) in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Sudan, Syria and Yemen; 3) enabling the State of Palestine, Sudan and Syria to quickly scale up cash operations and deliver crucial humanitarian cash transfers and payments to frontline workers; and 4) delivering a package of MHPSS rapid resource toolkits for humanitarian situations in Libya, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Sudan and Syria.

Working with 36 partners, UNICEF continued to support over 3.5 million people in northwest Syria. MENARO's child protection, education and WASH sections joined forces to launch the Waqti initiative. This established 112 Waqti centres that reached 200,000 children and caregivers with essential services, including washing facilities, mental health and psychosocial support and family tracing and reunification. Around 28,000 adolescent boys and girls were reached with gender- and age-specific support. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the WASH programme expanded its partnership with eight NGOs to reach 3.47 million people in need, including 1.8 million children.

UNICEF worked with national and international partners to deliver health and nutrition services. More than one million people received medical consultations and 133 vaccination teams operated. Overall, 752,659 children benefited from malnutrition prevention and treatment services, including 11,793 children with severe acute malnutrition and 327,055 pregnant and breastfeeding women.

Despite post-earthquake interruptions and limited local capacities, child protection, gender-based violence prevention and response services and explosive ordnance risk education reached to 534,441 children and caregivers. With implementing partners, UNICEF provided 204,788 children with mental health and psychosocial support and around 8,284 caregivers participated in a parenting programme.

LESSONS LEARNED AND INNOVATIONS

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Humanitarian Preparedness and Response

Multiple complex crises in the region and their significant humanitarian impact on children point to the need for more agile and innovative approaches to preparedness and response. MENARO plays a central role as the first line of support, as well as enabling an efficient, principled, and inclusive emergency preparedness and response. In 2023, the Regional Office scaled up preparedness efforts by strengthening risk assessments and developing contingency plans for worst-case scenarios. Twelve Country offices in the region were supported in developing contingency plans to mitigate the associated risks for children and to ensure adequate business continuity to deliver on UNICEF's mandate, in a potentially high-threat and severely constrained operating environment. One of the key lessons learned during this process is that continuous investment is required in the simulations and preparedness planning along the humanitarian development and peace continuum across the region. Also, strengthening country office relationships with local NGOs should be a priority to further advance the localization agenda, as such relationships proved critical for rapidly reaching vulnerable children in affected areas early in the onset of the crisis.

Additionally, there is a particular need to strengthen technical expertise in operationalizing humanitarian and inclusivity principles and ensuring accountability to affected populations (AAP) are prioritized in future emergencies. A key focus should be on exploring innovative ways to receive and use feedback from affected communities to improve humanitarian responses for children. For example, during cholera outbreaks in Lebanon and Syria, rapid community mobilization efforts, grounded in online and offline community feedback and implemented by localised partners, were vital for reducing the number of cases.

In conflict situations in Sudan and Syria, existing youth-led groups and networks were quickly mobilized, and young people were part of the immediate response, contributing to initial assessments, distributing essential items, and providing recreation activities for children and adolescents in safe spaces. This shows how investing in young people can contribute to building resilient and effective humanitarian responses.

Accelerating Results through Systemic Change

Across a number of programme areas, our learning in 2023 has reinforced the principle of working through systems and strengthening those as a basis for achieving results for children during normal and difficult times for any country.

To further advance the prevention and treatment of malnutrition, it was found that work through systems among critical nutrition stakeholders is crucial. The MENA Regional UN Nutrition Collaboration Framework developed in 2023 based on an initiative from UNICEF provides an outline as to how the UN agencies (FAO, UNICEF, WFP and WHO) will strategically collaborate to deliver joint and complementary work on nutrition through a systems strengthening approach. We have learnt that combating malnutrition among children is not only about providing food. It is about working on food systems, strengthening health systems to deliver services for children, ensuring robust water, sanitation and hygiene systems and putting in place social protection strategies and policies to be more responsive to the food and nutrition needs of the most vulnerable children and families.

Preparedness for Health in Emergencies

Preparedness for health in emergencies through enhancing national and sub-national capacity for cold chain, vaccine storage and service delivery, ensuring resilience against the backdrop of conflicts and natural disasters is critical. Successive emergencies have also flagged the need to better coordinate the logistics and health supply system components between the different partners, including WHO, to avoid duplication and to increase efficiencies, especially in the context of financial resource constraints.

The Global Review of the Humanitarian Cash Transfer Programming (HCT)

The global review of the HCT programming done jointly by MENARO and HQ including standalone case studies from Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen highlighted how effective engagement on HCT programming requires timely, strategic preparedness actions and investments at the country level in order to succeed. It also showcased that the different modalities for direct delivery of HCTs need to be based on context, scale, systems in place and other considerations. One key lesson learned in terms of success included use of existing systems and further strengthening those to bring capacities together for timely delivery across programme and operations within UNICEF.

On the Importance of Being a Voice for Children

In a region like MENA, UNICEF more than anywhere needs to be a voice for children, especially those living in severe emergency situations and in compromised contexts with respect to their rights. To be such a voice, we have found that there is a need for evidence, real time data and information about children, wherever they are. It is also important to forge alliances and partnerships especially with media and key influencers whose voice counts. To be a voice for children, we also need to stay close to them and their families, even in the toughest places. Throughout 2023, we have never let our guard down. UNICEF was there when the earthquakes struck Morocco and Syria, we were there when Derna was hit by floods, and we were there when the worst war hit Gaza and when war ravaged the various regions of Sudan. We never gave up on being a voice for children. A well-planned advocacy strategy in each of these crises with clear messages that were modified each time there was a change in the situation on the ground was crucial in keeping our voice heard in a meaningful way.

ENDNOTES

1 This annual report draws on data from UNICEF global databases and may not reflect the latest national estimates. Where non-UNICEF data are used, references are cited.

2 The UNICEF MENA region covers 20 countries. Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the State of Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates (collectively known as the Gulf Area) and Yemen.

3 World Bank (2019). Ending Learning Poverty – What Will It Take?

4 Zero-dose children have never received a dose of the diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis vaccine.

5 The 14 countries are Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, State of Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen.

6 The 12 countries are Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, State of Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and UAE.

7 Five CLACS are due for completion in 2024.

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