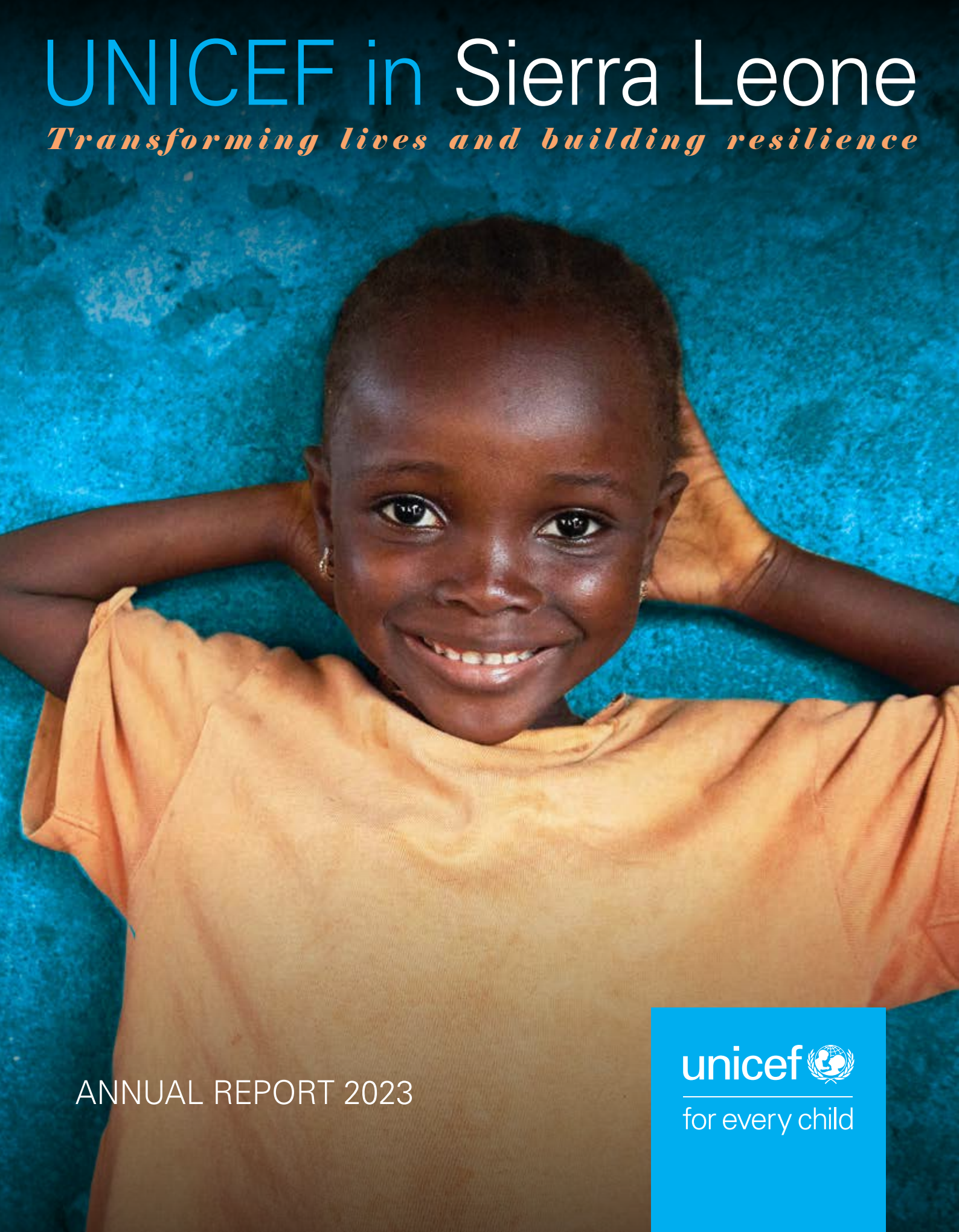
UNICEF in Sierra Leone

Transforming lives and building resilience



ANNUAL REPORT 2023

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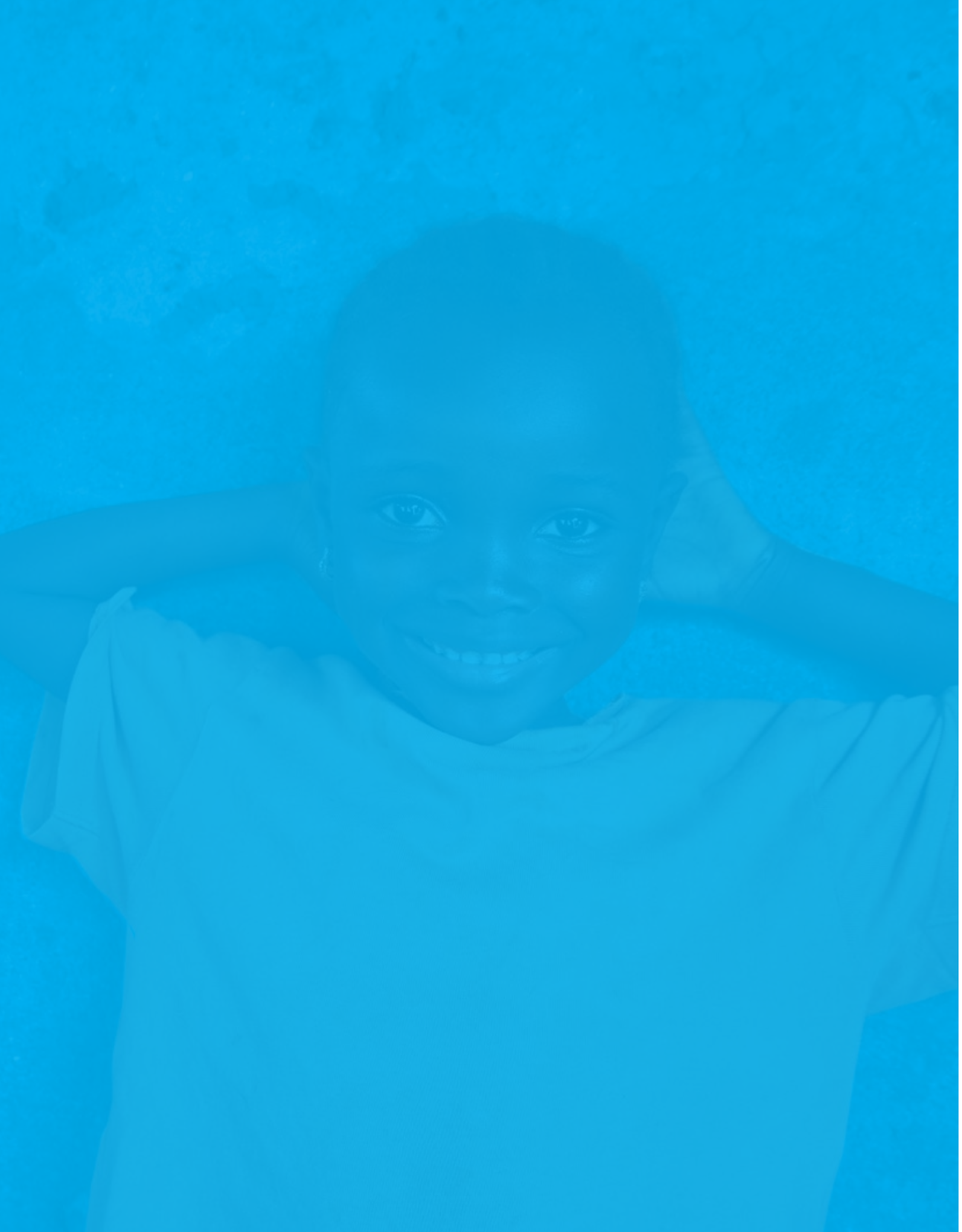
for every child



UNICEF in Sierra Leone

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ANNUAL REPORT 2023

unicef
for every child

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Foreword

Rudolf Schwenk, UNICEF Representative for Sierra Leone

We present this external annual report on the work of UNICEF Sierra Leone in 2023 as a testament to the determined spirit of the country's people and the resilience of its youngest citizens. It is a narrative not just of UNICEF's endeavours but also of a country's resolve to forge a better future for its children.

The past year has been marked by both accomplishments and challenges. Through collaborative efforts, we have seen significant reductions in child mortality and have made inroads into combating malnutrition among children. Our data showcases a decline in stunting and an improvement in educational access. We are far from achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, we remain steadfast in our commitment to turning the tide on the challenges children face.

UNICEF's strategic vision in Sierra Leone is rooted in the belief that every child represents unique potential waiting to be nurtured. Our integrated approach focuses on early intervention, from health care to education, to ensure children not only survive but also thrive. In partnership with the Government, and with the participation of civil society and communities, we are building robust systems for change.

This report underscores our relentless pursuit of a world where children are protected, educated, loved and listened to. It highlights our initiatives and strategies but also the stories of those whose lives we strive to improve. Every figure and fact in this document represents a milestone in a child's life, a step towards self-sufficiency for a family and progress for a nation.

Let me also extend my deepest gratitude to our partners and donors: your support has been invaluable in every achievement this year.

As we look to the future, this report is a roadmap as well as a reflection. It outlines the direction we are taking to realize the dreams of every child in Sierra Leone. The task ahead is substantial but, through collective action, we can ensure the future will be brighter than the past.

About Sierra Leone

Context & situation of children and women

Sierra Leone is among the top 40 countries making significant strides towards achieving the 48 child-related Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators. Nevertheless, the country faces challenges related to development and human well-being. Over the years, children and families have faced civil war, health emergencies, climate disasters and security problems.

Coupled with an unemployment rate of 3.6% in 2022, recent global economic difficulties have pushed families further into poverty, with 70% of children affected and 28% of households experiencing severe food insecurity. The Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) has struggled to finance quality social services for children and their families.

Sierra Leone has developed a comprehensive legal, policy and institutional framework for children. Maternal, infant, neonatal and under-five mortality rates have fallen, and progress is being made in the fight against malnutrition. In education, despite increased enrolment, learning outcomes are lagging. There are also significant inequalities in access. Meanwhile, young people often face barriers to voting and limited opportunities for meaningful political engagement.

Outcomes for women and girls consistently lag, owing to legal, social, institutional, cultural and other structural inequalities and gender norms. Unequal opportunities are exacerbated by factors such as early marriage for girls, teenage pregnancy and female genital mutilation. Violence against women and girls remains a pervasive problem in Sierra Leone.

Key development indicators

Children under 18 years make up
46%
of the population

Estimated GDP per capita is
$505
(2021)
7th lowest in the world

GDP growth forecasts are
3.1% 2023 **3.7%** 2024 **4.3%** 2025

As of 2023, the annual inflation rate was
55%
and food inflation was at
60%

Multidimensional child poverty dropped from
77%
in 2010 to
66%
in 2017

Children 6–23 months in severe food poverty increased from
34.5%
in 2019 to
46.5%
in 2021

Sierra Leone ranked
162 of 191
countries on the Gender Inequality Index in 2021

Sierra Leone has the
11th
lowest Human Development Index ranking of all countries

UNICEF in Sierra Leone

As the largest UN agency in Sierra Leone, and with a strong footprint in the country for the past 35 years, UNICEF has worked in collaboration with GoSL and other partners to strengthen systems, boost capacities and implement policies to reduce inequalities among children and adolescents across the country. GoSL's commitment to effectively coordinating domestic and international resources was key to achieving results in 2023.

GoSL and UNICEF have extended their Country Programme of Cooperation (CPC) 2020–2023 to 2024. This aligns with the one-year extension of the United Nations Sustainable Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) as preparations continue for the new UNSDCF and CPC and the forthcoming Medium-Term National Development Plan (MTNDP) 2025–2030, in line with Agenda 2030.

UNICEF, in collaboration with other UN agencies and partners, has supported these planning processes, with a focus on Leaving No One Behind and strengthening the development–peace–humanitarian nexus to accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

UNICEF's support has led, piloted and scaled up solutions and built systems in key areas, including:

- Health
- Nutrition
- Education
- Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)
- Child protection
- Social policy and social protection

while ensuring synergies and applying strategies across all programmes to ensure:

- Climate action
- Emergency preparedness and response
- Adolescent development and participation
- Gender-transformative programming
- Social behaviour change
- Planning, monitoring and evaluation
- Advocacy, communication and partnerships
- Innovation and digital transformation
- Effective operations, supply and logistics

UNICEF's Goal Areas

This annual report reflects results made by UNICEF Sierra Leone in 2023 in line with the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022–2025 Goal Areas and the Gender Action Plan 2018–2021.

1 **Goal area 1**

Every child survives and thrives

2 **Goal area 2**

Every child learns and acquires skills for the future

3 **Goal area 3**

Every child is protected from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and harmful practices

4 **Goal area 4**

Every child uses safe and equitable WASH services and lives in a safe and sustainable climate and environment

5 **Goal area 5**

Every child, including adolescents, has access to inclusive social protection and lives free of poverty

Highlight of key results

Goal area 1

Every child survives and thrives

Maternal mortality decreased from
717 to 443
deaths per 100,000 births between 2019 and 2023

The lives of
12% more
newborns than in 2022 were saved, in
16
Special-Care Baby Units (SCBUs)

Over
25,000
children with severe acute malnutrition were treated, with a cure rate of
98%

90%
of children 0–11 months were vaccinated with three doses of DTP-containing Penta vaccine

93%
of districts have at least
80%
of children vaccinated, signifying better herd immunity. Polio transmission remains interrupted

The country received
550,000
doses of the WHO-approved malaria vaccine

Goal area 2

Every child learns and acquires skills for the future

29
early childhood development centres were completed and officially handed over to GoSL

4,836
teachers were trained, expanding access to education for over 24,000 children 3–5 years old

Gross enrolment rates rose from
24% to 25%
for pre-primary and from
152% to 157%
for primary education between 2022 and 2023

Primary completion and transition rates to secondary education are
higher for girls
for the first time

Learning Passport offered the complete curriculum, benefiting
16,700 people, while E-UPSHIFT provided digital, problem-solving and critical thinking skills to over
21,500
young people

Over
1,000
youth were reached with climate change education and awareness campaigns to implement the recommendations in the Climate Landscape Analysis for Children report

Goal area 3

Every child is protected from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and harmful practices

Training of over
720
frontline personnel and enhanced institutional capacities have extended child protection services to
56,000
children, surpassing the target of
16,000

59,184
community members, including
32,588
children, were supported to gain practical life skills, practise positive parenting and engage in reflective dialogues

Innovative strides in case and information management for
child protection and
gender-based violence (GBV)
were enabled through digitalized systems and the e-referral pathway, as part of strengthening provisions for access to services

The National Strategy for the Reduction of Teenage Pregnancy and Child Marriage
was reviewed along with the Child Rights Bill 2022, the Social Work Bill 2022 and national civil registration legislation

Goal area 4

Every child uses safe and equitable WASH services and lives in a safe and sustainable climate and environment

UNICEF and GoSL unveiled the
National Outcome Routine Mapping (NORM) Survey Report
and the national
WASH Information Management Systems (WASHIMS)
as evidence generation, advocacy and knowledge management tools

Innovative solar and climate-resilient adaptations, particularly solar-powered motorized systems, were leveraged to
enhance the capacity and sustainability of WASH services
while addressing climate change

Access to basic water supply was maintained at around
62.6%
and access to at least basic sanitation at
31.4%,
including
13.6%
safely managed sanitation

Goal area 5

Every child, including adolescents, has access to inclusive social protection and lives free of poverty

UNICEF and the Ministry of Finance developed a handbook on
child-responsive budgeting to build capacity

Capacity of both UNICEF staff and GoSL counterparts was strengthened to develop a
cash+ model
for the
prevention of child marriage and teenage pregnancy
and to address
humanitarian needs
during emergencies

A new system for the assessment and
certification of disability
is under development, aligned with international standards

Major contributions and drivers of results

Across the five strategic Goal Areas, UNICEF Sierra Leone is devoted to enhancing the rights and well-being of children in Sierra Leone.

These comprehensive efforts are designed to address the myriad challenges that confront Sierra Leone's youth and most vulnerable, establishing a groundwork for a future where every child can thrive in a more equitable and hopeful environment.

goal area 1

Every child survives and thrives

UNICEF has made progress in reducing maternal, infant, neonatal and under-five mortality rates over the past decade. The prevalence of stunting among children under five has also declined. Enhancing health services and improving nutrition have led to significant progress. Despite challenges relating to the quality of health care and systemic barriers, strategic collaborations demonstrate a deep commitment to securing a healthier future for all children.

Neonatal mortality rate
(11th highest in the world)
31 /1,000 live births (UNIGME 2021)

Under-five mortality rate
(5th highest in the world)
105 /1,000 live births (UNIGME 2021)

Maternal mortality rate
(16th highest in the world)
443 /100,000 live births (UNIGME 2021)

Stunting
26.2%
(NNS 2021)

Wasting
5.2%
(NNS 2021)

GoSL approved the Breast Milk Substitutes Act 2021 promoting exclusive breastfeeding and a countrywide behaviour change campaign ('Stronger with Breastmilk Only'). The first-ever Child Survival Action Plan, National Child Health Programme and National Community Scorecard exemplify efforts to strengthen health policy and service delivery systems to achieve SDG 3.

However, health and nutrition outcomes need accelerated efforts to achieve SDG 3, owing to:

- Insufficient availability of quality services as a result of human and financial resource constraints
- A weak supply chain, leading to recurrent stockouts of essential drugs and commodities
- Inadequate knowledge of effective care practices among families and caregivers
- Subpar health sector management

UNICEF has aligned its programming with the National Health Sector Strategic Plan 2021–2025. Sierra Leone became a Pathfinder country for Child Survival in May 2023 based on past work and on GoSL commitment with the support of global health partners including UNICEF.

UNICEF also assisted GoSL to roll out a number of policies, strategies and guidelines on maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health and nutrition. This enabled the coherent treatment of common childhood illnesses of over 1.6 million children.

Child survival and well-being

Sierra Leone is still far from the SDG 3 targets of 70 per 100,000 under-5 mortality and 12 per 1,000 neonatal mortality. Challenges in maternal and child health care remain. A lack of quality obstetric services means 23% of deliveries take place at home, the majority without a skilled birth attendant.

In April 2023, UNICEF supported GoSL's launch of the Child Survival Action Plan 2023–2025 and subsequently the National Child Health Programme, to ensure quality health programme implementation across the continuum of care.

In May 2023, GoSL, WHO and partners including UNICEF launched the report of the Universal Health and Preparedness Review, examining challenges and priorities in the health response. This led to creation of the National Public Health Agency in December 2023 to manage health emergencies.

Special-Care Baby Units

In 2023, UNICEF and its partners provided critical support to 16 SCBUs. These offer specialized care to newborns who require extra attention and medical support. Each SCBU is staffed with a dedicated multidisciplinary team to ensure the newborns receive comprehensive care and have all their medical, nursing and hygiene needs met.

SCBUs are equipped with high-end medical equipment to provide state-of-art care. UNICEF has also built the capacity of technicians in preventative maintenance. To ensure continuous functionality, UNICEF supported the solarization of five SCBUs in 2023; this effort will reach an additional five in 2024.

In 2023, across the 16 SCBUs, the provision of a high level of care and support led to the saving of 7,979 newborn lives (4,574 male; 3,405 female), marking a 12% increase on 2022.

Child health

Preventable illnesses (malaria, acute respiratory infections and diarrhoeal diseases) account for nearly half of under-five deaths in Sierra Leone. Almost one in five child deaths occurs in the first month of life. The neonatal mortality rate has almost stagnated since 2015.

Meanwhile, there was a 45% decrease in the incidence of malaria between 2016 and 2021 – but it remains a leading cause of morbidity and mortality in children. Only 12% of HIV-exposed infants have received early infant diagnosis. Fewer than two-thirds of health facilities offer prevention of mother-to-child transmission and referral.

UNICEF helped GoSL in the implementation of protocols on the treatment of malaria, pneumonia and diarrhoea. More than 1,622,337 children were treated using new protocols for malaria and other childhood illnesses. A total of 3,832 children were tested for HIV and linked to appropriate care.

Vaccination

2023 saw a leap in terms of availability of the cold chain as part of health system-strengthening support received from various donors as a part of the COVID-19 response. The annual immunization programme review noted that 94% of health facilities at all levels had functional cold chain equipment. UNICEF also supported the training of cold chain technicians.

Social and behavioural change interventions and periodic intensified routine immunization brought vaccines closer to communities. 90% of children aged 0–11 months received 3 doses of DTP-containing Penta vaccine. Furthermore, 93% of districts recorded at least 80% vaccination coverage, indicating improved herd immunity and sustained interruption of polio transmission. COVID-19 vaccination uptake rose from 61% in 2022 to 95% of the target population being fully vaccinated. Using a similar model, the HPV vaccine exceeded its target by reaching an additional 25,535 girls.

In December 2023, Sierra Leone received 550,000 doses of the WHO-approved malaria vaccine. UNICEF has also supported the Ministry of Health to distribute nearly 5.4 million Insecticide-Treated Nets using a digitized registration system. Over 400,000 nets were distributed during the pilot phase in 2023; the campaign will reach 15 other districts across the country in 2024.

Nutrition

More than 70% of children aged 6–23 months are not given a diversified diet and more than 50% do not meet the recommended minimum meal frequency for their age. Anaemia affects 76% of children under 5 and 49% of women aged 15–49.

In 2023, GoSL, with support from UNICEF, continued to co-finance nutrition initiatives, contributing $99,000 to the Nutrition Match Fund to ensure the availability of ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF).

More than 25,000 children received treatment for severe acute malnutrition, with the cure rate improving dramatically to 98%, from 84% in 2022. At least 11,000 children affected by severe acute malnutrition and 19,041 by moderate acute malnutrition benefited from life-saving treatment. Vitamin A supplementation and deworming services also saw significant increases.

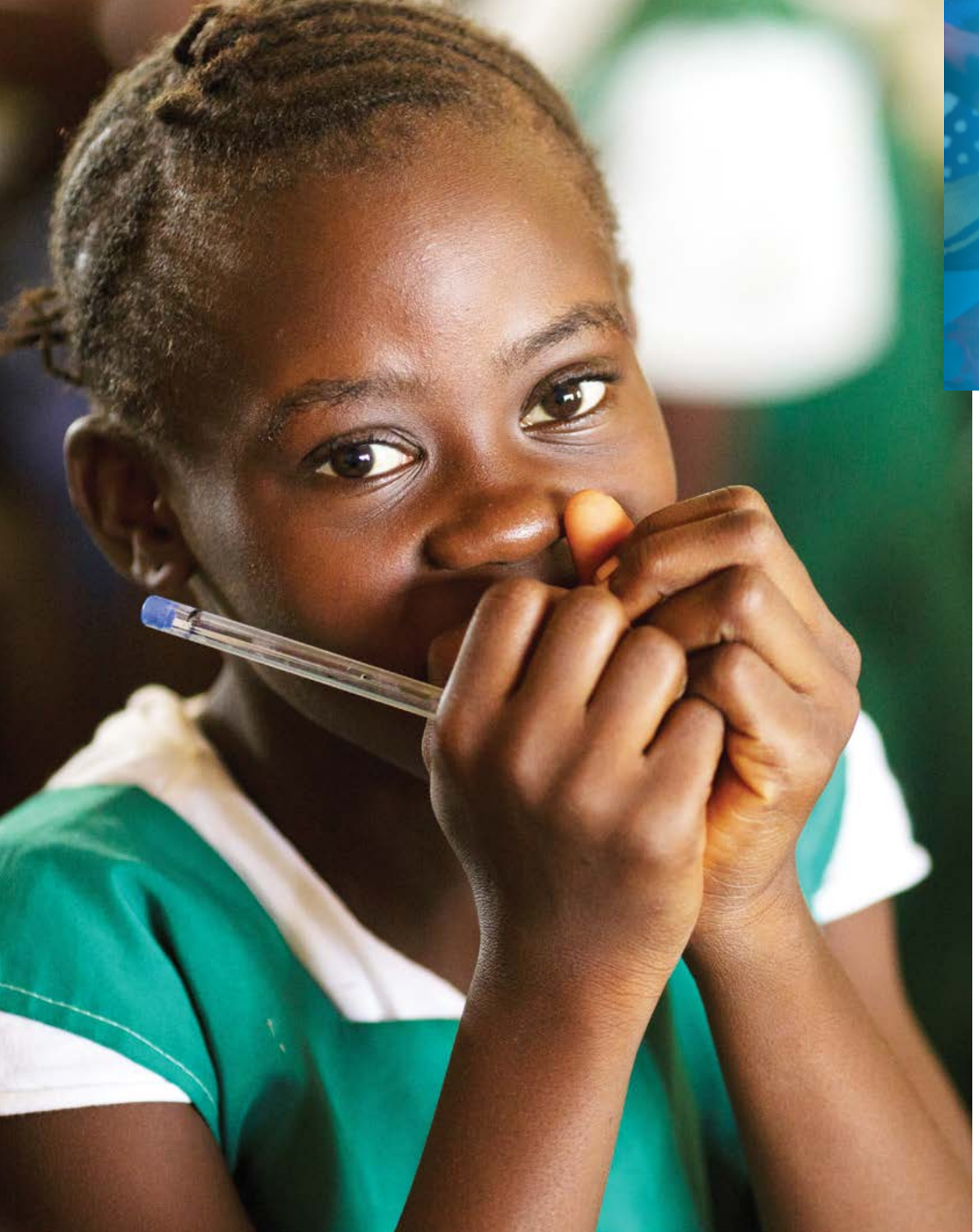
STRENGTHENING SYSTEMS TO FIGHT MALNUTRITION

In Moyamba district, health workers like Nurse Hawa Momodu are on the frontlines in combating child malnutrition. Community health workers screened over 100,000 children in 2023. With one in four children under five stunted and thousands suffering from severe acute malnutrition, timely detection and treatment are vital.

A robust nutrition surveillance system bolsters the collection of nutrition data at community level, to reveal the unseen struggles against hunger and ensure no child is overlooked. Data collected by health workers contributes to a national database, helping track trends and inform timely interventions.

A testament to this system's success is Samson, a young child Nurse Hawa identified as severely malnourished. Thanks to the surveillance system, Samson received prompt treatment at a hospital and recovered, a shining example of the programme's life-saving impact.

Nurse Hawa's role extends beyond medical care; she educates families on nutrition, hygiene and health-seeking behaviours. The transformation of children like Samson from frailty to health stands as a powerful indicator of the success of UNICEF's partnership with Sierra Leone's health workers and communities in building a healthier, more hopeful future for its children.



goal area 2

Every child learns and acquires skills for the future

UNICEF strives to ensure every child learns and acquires essential skills for the future. With notable improvements in enrolment and completion, alongside strategic investments in early childhood, curriculum development and digital education platforms, UNICEF is breaking down barriers to equitable education. This will help bridge the gap in educational access and quality, particularly for the most marginalized groups, setting a solid groundwork for lifelong learning and empowerment.

Participation in organized learning 1 year before official primary entry age (2022)
24% boys 26% girls

Unqualified teachers
38%

Primary gross completion rate (2022)
97% boys 104% girls

Upper secondary gross completion rate (2022)
99% boys 106% girls

Grade 4 students who do not read proficiently (2021)
64%

Gross enrolment rates for pre-primary and primary increased from 24% and 152% in 2022 to 25% and 157% in 2023. Primary completion and transition rates to secondary also rose, from 95% and 119% to 101% and 121%, respectively, with more girls completing and transitioning than boys for the first time.

However, despite these increases, and despite high investment in education in Sierra Leone, at 22% of the budget, many children are behind in terms of learning outcomes, across the grades. There are also significant inequalities in access: children with disabilities, those in rural areas and those from lower-income households have fewer opportunities for enrolment, inclusion and completion.

UNICEF has been selected as Grant Agent by the Global Partnership for Education for the $50 million investment for Sierra Leone in 2023–2027. UNICEF is supporting GoSL in its Transforming Education Summit commitment to expand access and improve the quality of foundational learning outcomes.

Improving the quality of foundational education and early childhood development

Sierra Leone faces significant challenges in educational access and in foundational learning outcomes, in particular in ECD. UNICEF's appointment as Grant Agent for Global Partnership for Education financing has helped support an expansion in this regard.

UNICEF has also supported GoSL in implementing the National Curriculum Framework, strengthening continuous professional development for teachers, establishing teachers' communities of practice in 11 of 16 districts and starting the review of the instructional core for early grades foundational numeracy. This initiative has provided teaching and learning materials in line with GoSL's priority on 'Delivering the Foundations of Learning for All.'

In 2023, 29 ECD centres were completed and handed over to GoSL, and 6,514 teachers were trained, to enhance education for over 24,000 children aged 3–5. Such sustained efforts have broadened educational access, particularly in early childhood, establishing a strong foundation for primary education across Sierra Leone.

E-UPSHIFT

UNICEF's global E-UPSHIFT is a social innovator accelerator for young people aged 10–24 that unlocks their generational potential to create real and tangible change in their lives and communities. Through this, UNICEF has leveraged innovations in technology such as U-report and RapidPro to prioritize youth empowerment and education through the provision of digital, problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

UNICEF's Learning Passport provides technical assistance globally to ministries of education in developing robust ICT policies for education. Collaboration with telecommunication and mobile network operators ensures affordable and widespread access to digital content. UNICEF also creates an enabling environment for other sectors to plan and implement digital solutions, through infrastructure improvements and the fostering of digital skills-building among the young generation.

Over 214,000 users were engaged through these platforms. Learning Passport provided a complete curriculum that benefited 16,700 individuals. E-UPSHIFT equipped more than 21,500 young people (30% girls) with skills in the context of peacebuilding, active citizenship and improved socioeconomic opportunities.

Youth-led action in education, climate change and civic participation

Youth-led action in education, climate change and civic participation (youth champions) is an example of how UNICEF has amplified the voices of youth in decision-making across thematic areas, through consultations with youth networks and through digital platforms like U-report.

These efforts have led to increased youth engagement in policy advocacy, particularly on climate change. This has contributed to Sierra Leone's participation in international events such as COP28 and YouthConnekt. Over 1,000 youth and community members were reached with climate change education and awareness campaigns to foster the youth-led approach to transforming education and implement the recommendations in the Sierra Leone Climate Landscape Analysis for Children report.

The Giga project and school connectivity

UNICEF's global Giga project aims to connect every school to the Internet and every young person to information, opportunity and choice.

Despite delays, training and installations for the Giga project in Sierra Leone were completed in 2023, offering valuable lessons for future technology projects in education. The pilot phase was restricted to 39 schools, setting a foundation for government-led expansion and development of realistic work plans for timely, quality connectivity installations.

Although 100% of the trainings and installations were completed, it was not possible to achieve 100% of the connections, owing to delays in hardware installation. However, this has been a valuable learning curve for UNICEF and its partners, including GoSL, for future similar projects.

Youth engagement/participation

The expansion of youth engagement efforts has led to their meaningful involvement in policy discussions. This has included a youth consultation for the draft MTNDP and increased participation in UNICEF's programming and advocacy work.

BUILDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF GIRLS (AND BOYS) IN TECHNOLOGY

In Freetown, a group of young Sierra Leoneans was captivated by Hawa Yokie's story. Despite societal expectations steering her towards traditional study fields, 23-year-old Hawa embraced her passion for technology and now leads Kamara Yokie Innovation Hub, inspiring youths in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).

Only one-third of Sierra Leone's population have Internet access and even fewer young people have Internet-enabled mobile phones. This gap is more pronounced for girls, who face underrepresentation in digital learning, heightened online harassment and fewer tech career opportunities.

Hawa addressed inquiries from her audience on topics ranging from navigating a male-dominated sector to overcoming financial barriers. Her commitment to break through gender and socioeconomic barriers is supported by UNICEF, which provides no-cost digital and life skills training, harnessing programmes like E-UPSHIFT. This initiative enhances digital literacy and innovation through Digital Learning Hubs and UNICEF's Learning Passport, reaching thousands with essential skills for the digital age.

UNICEF's Babasile Daniel, who initiated the UNICEF Weekend Children STEM Hub, emphasized the importance of confidence in innovation, especially for girls. Hawa exemplifies this, inspiring the next generation to embrace risks and pursue innovative solutions.

Feedback from participants like Adonis, 15, and Mary, 20, reflects a newfound belief in the power of goals and authenticity. Hawa's journey is inspiring young Sierra Leoneans to build a future where girls and boys alike can thrive in technology and innovation.

goal area 3

Every child is protected from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and harmful practices

UNICEF is dedicated to protecting every child from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and harmful practices, and supporting each child's right to a legal identity. Government-led coordination, cross-sectoral collaboration and the strategic use of digital technology play pivotal roles in strengthening child protection. Continuous capacity-building is recognized as crucial, reflecting an understanding of the dynamic nature of challenges in this domain.

Emerging priorities include online violence prevention, justice for children and migration challenges. Sierra Leone's commitment to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration aligns with international standards, emphasizing the need for a coordinated, global approach to child protection.

Violence against children
87% (2017, MICS)

Child labour - Almost
1 in 5 (aged 12–14)
1 in 2 (aged 5–17)
(Out-of-School Children Study 2021;
Child Marriage in West and Central Africa 2022)

Child marriage
30% (2019, CEIC)

Female genital mutilation
83% (2019, DHS)

Birth certificates
for children under 5
31% (2019, DHS)

Although the rate is declining, early marriage in Sierra Leone remains high, as does the rate of female genital mutilation. Meanwhile, again despite a downward trend, 3.4% of girls 15–19 years old had experienced sexual violence in 2019. Estimates on the prevalence of mental disorders among adolescents (age 10–19) suggests Sierra Leone has slightly higher rates than other nations in the region.

Only 10% of births notified by the Ministry of Health were registered in 2023, compared with 92% in 2022. The drop is linked to the guideline to use mobile registration, which is available in only 19 out of 1,282 health facilities.

Child protection and referral protocols

In 2023, the Information Sharing Protocol and the revised National Referral Protocol underscored UNICEF's commitment to ensuring confidentiality and safety in managing GBV cases, with the GBVIMS+ demonstrating tangible impact by providing timely and survivor-centred services.

The training of over 721 social workers, justice and frontline staff in child protection and GBV case management reflects a commitment to building local capacity. Over 5,552 children (3,294 girls) were reached with case management, psychosocial support, alternative care and GBV services, and over 20,000 calls were received and dealt with by the 116 Helpline. The police Family Support Unit registered 3,547 cases involving children (2,340 girls). Sexual violence was the largest category of offences against children, at 1,508 cases (1,478 girls), with girls aged 11–15 the most affected age group (783 cases).

Youth-led initiatives in education, climate change and civic participation and the Youth Peace Ambassadors programme have been key in addressing GBV in schools.

Positive parenting and transformation of social norms

Some 86.5% of children aged under 14 reported having experienced some form of violent discipline in the household in 2017, up from 64.8% in 2010. Corporal punishment is widespread in school settings.

A scaling-up of life skills, community engagement and parenting programmes from 4 districts in 2022 to all 10 in 2023 supported 59,184 community members, including 32,588 children, to gain practical skills, practise positive parenting and engage in reflective dialogues.

The integration of stronger investments in social norms for violence prevention aligns with the holistic strategy to address the root causes of child protection issues. The positive parenting curriculum pilot results highlight innovative components in implementation modalities and methodology, offering valuable lessons for future programmes.

Support to the development/review of key policies

Although the Child Rights Bill and the Social Work Bill remain as drafts, the review of the National Strategy for Teenage Pregnancy Reduction 2018–2022 under the joint UNFPA/UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage was a milestone in strengthening the protective environment for children. Major progress has been made on strengthening legal reform through the Child Rights Act and birth registration legislation.

Government capacity on human rights treaty reporting to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child was strengthened through the training of 32 government stakeholders and representatives from the Human and Child Rights Commissions. This training deal with the CRC and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women in particular.

UNICEF/UNDP Peacebuilding Fund

UNICEF and UNDP, supported by the Peacebuilding Fund, worked to create a peaceful and protective environment during the general elections. The focus was on the six most conflict-prone districts, through youth and community engagement.

Additionally, UNICEF supported the Legal Aid Board to raise awareness among youth in 435 schools and 202 communities in 5 focus districts on rights and responsibilities during elections. A total of 227,185 (75,852 female) students and 89,271 (26,852) community members participated. Lawyers and paralegals provided legal representation to 168 people (39 women) arrested and detained for election-related offences.

GBV information management and digital referral pathways

As a global leader in Child Protection Information Management (CPMIS+), UNICEF assisted Sierra Leone to become the first country in a government-led and non-humanitarian context to pilot and launch (in three districts) a GBV information management system (GBVIMS+) and digital referral pathways to support GBV case management throughout the elections and beyond. The government's dedication to expanding GBVMIS+ nationwide is clearly outlined in the country's MTNDP. Both UNICEF and UNFPA are committed to assisting GoSL in extending the reach of GBVIMS+ throughout the nation.

Since the launch, 146 cases have been reported and the system has been rolled out to 4 additional districts. Training has been given to 180 case workers on case management and services. Additionally, UNICEF supported the development of a digital GBV service register, the e-Referral Pathway (e-RPW) in April 2023. This lists more than 150 GBV services at district and chiefdom level.

The Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs strengthened coordination, reporting and referral through a number of different helplines and situation rooms. After mass awareness-raising on the 116 Helpline, 19,950 calls were recorded in 2023; 32 cases were referred from August 2022 to September 2023.

FROM STREET LIFE TO A LIFE OF PEACE: PEACEBUILDING FUND TRANSFORMS THE LIFE OF A YOUNG MAN

In Susan's Bay, a marginalized community, Peter Sesay, once a street boy entangled in violence and political strife, has transformed into a beacon of peace. His life as a Youth Peace Ambassador now echoes with messages of harmony and tolerance.

Susan's Bay has long been known for its challenges: unemployment, crowded living conditions and a prevalence of substance abuse. The youth unemployment rate is at 10%. The streets here often become a refuge for the young with no work, where the cycle of violence is fuelled by political manipulation and social media misinformation.

UNICEF, in partnership with UNDP and the Peacebuilding Fund, is working to reshape this landscape. By funding the training of 120 Youth Peace Ambassadors across 5 key districts, including Susan's Bay, the initiative aims to foster an environment conducive to peaceful elections and social unity.

These Ambassadors, once trained, take to the streets and community centres. They have used theatre and dialogue to engage over 33,000 people in the cause of peace. Their outreach represents a preventative measure against election violence, and calls for political tolerance and coexistence.

Peter's journey is more than just a personal victory; it is a narrative that ignites the possibility of a harmonious future for the youth of Susan's Bay and the wider Sierra Leonean community. His story underscores the impact of UNICEF and its partners' work in turning the tide of youth involvement in violence, steering them towards being agents of change in their communities.

goal area 4

Every child uses safe and equitable WASH services and lives in a safe and sustainable climate and environment

UNICEF Sierra Leone aims to ensure the right of every child to access safe and equitable WASH services, crucial for a sustainable and healthy environment. By advancing WASH infrastructure, advocating for lasting behavioural change and employing innovative solutions, UNICEF strives to mitigate health risks and secure a resilient future for the nation's children and most vulnerable families.

Using basic water supply
62.6% (2022)

Using safely managed water supply
12.5% (2020)

Using basic sanitation services
17.8% (2022)

Using safely managed sanitation
13.6% (2022)

Open defecation
25.1% (2022)

The magnitude of the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone largely resulted from limited access to clean water and sanitation facilities. This continues to predispose the country to outbreaks of cholera. During the last major cholera outbreak, in 2012, over 23,000 cases and 280 deaths were recorded.

Handwashing with soap and water, which peaked at over 80% during the Ebola outbreak, fell to 23% in 2017. Changes in behaviour, especially handwashing with soap, that helped break the Ebola infection chain, were not sustained in rural communities, demonstrating that lasting behavioural change requires continuing efforts.

Sierra Leone was commended as one of the best-managed countries under COVID-19, as the only country globally that had a country-wide lockdown for less than one week.

Sierra Leone has made progress on access to WASH services. However, according to WASHNORM (2022), 18% of improved water sources are not functional while only one-quarter of households have water sources within their premises. Poor quality of drinking water is linked to inadequate water surveillance and insufficient water treatment and storage systems. The rate of open defecation dropped from 26% in 2015 to 19% in 2017 (JMP) but increased to 25.1% in 2022 (WASHNORM).

According to JMP, an estimated 35% of peripheral health care units and 26% of primary schools do not have appropriate WASH facilities. Almost half of available school latrines are unisex. In 2016, 83% of girls did not have access to adequate facilities for menstrual management in schools.

UNICEF works with GoSL to support evidence-generating and knowledge management tools in WASH and to leverage innovative solutions to improve WASH services in the country.

UNICEF support to evidence-generating and knowledge management tools

Lack of accessible, quality data on WASH services in Sierra Leone has hindered effective planning, advocacy and knowledge management. Disaggregated data is particularly critical to make it possible to understand and address WASH needs comprehensively.

In 2023, UNICEF supported GoSL in launching two critical evidence generation tools: the National Outcome Routine Mapping (WASHNORM) Survey Report and the national WASH Information Management Systems (WASHIMS). These were designed to provide essential data on access to and quality of WASH services across different regions and demographics, for use across sectors.

Both tools confirmed inequitable access to basic WASH services. According to JMP, access to basic water supply was maintained at around 65%, with 53% of the rural population having access compared with 78% of the urban population, and people in rural areas five times more likely to defecate in the open than those in urban areas; basic sanitation services stand at 23%. Similarly, WASHNORM revealed that 54.5% of the rural population had access compared with 79.4% of the urban population, and people in rural areas were about nine times more likely to defecate in the open than those in urban areas. Access to basic water supply was maintained at around 62.6% while basic sanitation services were at 34.1%.

Innovative solutions in the WASH sector

Ensuring the sustainability of WASH services while addressing climate change effects poses a significant challenge in Sierra Leone. Traditional WASH systems are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, necessitating innovative solutions.

UNICEF has responded proactively by leveraging solar and climate-resilient solutions for WASH services. This has included the introduction of solar-powered motorized systems to enhance the capacity and durability of these essential services.

These innovative solutions are part of a larger framework of support by the UN family, which provided $51.74 million in core resources, a 4.33% increase on 2022. The funding also supported environmental projects, such as climate-smart agriculture and nutrition initiatives, and played a role in the broader context of improving nutrition and food security through climate-resilient approaches.

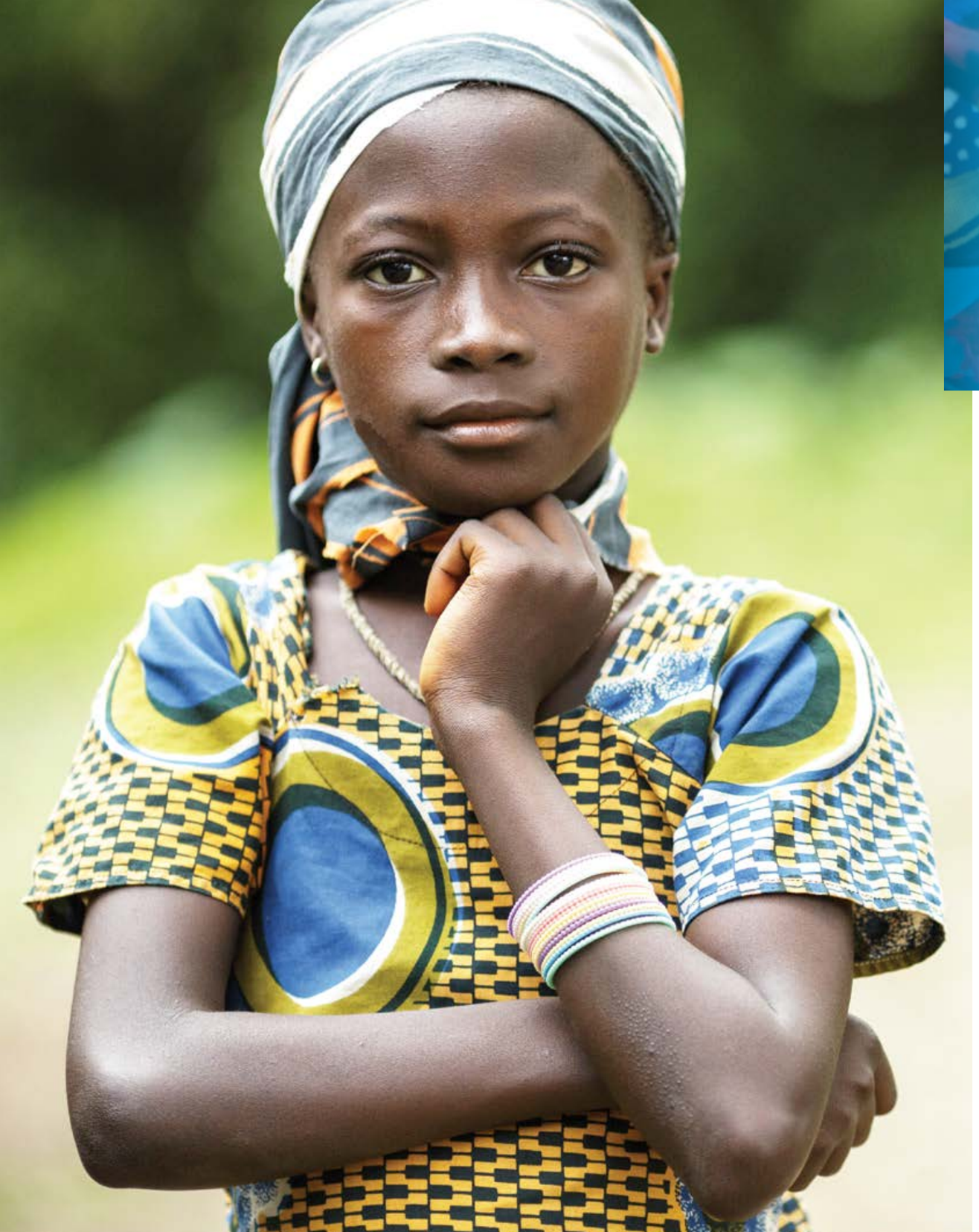
FISHING COMMUNITY OF 1,500 FAMILIES HAS ACCESS TO NEW TOILETS FOR THE FIRST TIME

Freetown's Last Banking fishing community has witnessed a significant transformation. Mbalu Bangura, with her grandchildren Ama and Kofi, is celebrating the arrival of new public toilets. This is a fundamental change in a community where open defecation was once the norm. This development is part of a larger initiative to improve WASH services in rural coastal fishing communities.

The project, a collaboration between the Government of Iceland and Sierra Leone's Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources with support from UNICEF, has provided single-sex toilets and accessible facilities for individuals with disabilities, and extensive water supply schemes. The impact on public health is tangible, and includes reduced cases of diarrhoea, malaria and malnutrition.

The initiative has not only improved health outcomes but also restored dignity to families in this and surrounding communities. Bylaws ensure the maintenance of cleanliness and equitable access to these facilities, reflecting a commitment to non-discrimination and community welfare.

Training provided on handwashing and hygiene practices also represents a vital component in the fight against preventable diseases.



goal area 5

Every child, including adolescents, has access to inclusive social protection and lives free of poverty

Emphasizing social protection for children and adolescents in Sierra Leone is pivotal owing to its potential to break cycles of poverty and inequality. The involvement of youth in policy development leverages their unique perspectives in shaping strategies that directly affect their lives and futures. Addressing critical issues like early marriage and teenage pregnancy through comprehensive policies and innovative solutions such as the cash+ model demonstrates a commitment to tackling the root causes of vulnerability and age-specific risks.

Children covered by social protection systems
0.8%

Children living in multidimensional poverty
66%
(2017)

CASH+, ALSO CALLED INTEGRATED SOCIAL PROTECTION, IS A COMBINATION OF CASH TRANSFERS AND COMPLEMENTARY PROGRAMMES TO HELP THE POOREST FAMILIES MEET THEIR BASIC NEEDS AND GENERATE A WIDE RANGE OF BENEFITS, SUCH AS INCREASED HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTIVE CAPACITY AND IMPROVED CHILDREN'S SCHOOL ATTENDANCE.

UNICEF's programme aims to establish a protective environment where every child and adolescent in Sierra Leone can grow up in dignity, access opportunities for development and contribute meaningfully to society. UNICEF's engagement with the Ministry of Finance has led to the development of a handbook on child-responsive budgeting, with a view to strengthening social spending for children.

Adolescents and youth and policy development

To enhance youth involvement in policy and advocacy, in October 2023 UNICEF invited UN and UNICEF Youth Peace Ambassadors to participate in key results-based training for UNICEF staff and partners, ahead of the Strategic Moment of Reflection and development of the new CPC. In December, UNICEF included them in the SMR along with GoSL and other partners. Here, a session was held on what adolescents and youth can contribute to policy through advocacy and dialogue.

GoSL considered this a best practice and asked UNICEF to facilitate further youth engagement in upcoming national development planning consultations.

National Social Protection Strategy

Early marriage in Sierra Leone remains high, at 30%, as does teenage pregnancy, which was at 21% in 2019. The country has also faced challenges in assessing disability in order to be able to enhance social protection coverage.

In 2023, UNICEF enhanced knowledge and capacities to support child protection. Following the validation and launch of the National Social Protection Strategy, UNICEF assisted both GoSL counterparts and UNICEF staff in developing a cash+ model for the prevention of child marriage and teenage pregnancy .

Meanwhile, efforts to develop a new system for the assessment and certification of disability continued to progress in 2023. UNICEF has furthermore continued supporting the National Commission for Social Action in the pilot registration of persons with disabilities in the national social registry, an exercise intended to strengthen targeting of person with disabilities for social protection programmes.

Capacity-building on social protection for local councils in 2023 was a first step towards raising the capacity of district-level authorities to engage in social protection activities.

UNICEF support to policy development and planning

Weaknesses in governance at the district level were a concern across Sierra Leone. To address this, along with the World Bank, UNICEF aided GoSL to develop a comprehensive package of support for district development planning. This included a template for district development plans that contains key child indicators to be introduced in four districts.

This initiative is expected to improve child indicator monitoring. In 2023, UNICEF along with GoSL completed a local government budget and expenditure analysis for five districts on child protection and disability inclusion. This study is important as a first step towards strengthening equity-based fiscal decentralization, as well as further capacity-building for district councils on planning and budgeting.

YOUTH PEACE AMBASSADORS PROMOTE PEACE AND UNITY TO ELIMINATE VIOLENCE AROUND ELECTIONS

In Makeni's Binkoloh community, Magaret Kamara and Desmond Kanu, both 19, embody the role of Youth Peace Ambassadors. Their mission is to instil a spirit of peace and discourage violence. This was especially important during the charged atmosphere of the June 2023 elections. The youth of Sierra Leone, often drawn into political conflict, are their primary focus.

UNICEF has tapped into the power of the U-report platform, engaging over 185,000 young participants in conversations about peace and electoral issues.

Magaret and Desmond were tired of seeing violence distort friendships and communal harmony and were driven to change the narrative around political allegiances. Their campaign, reaching hundreds, is part of a broader initiative spanning 5 districts, where 120 young Ambassadors have been trained to promote peace and political tolerance.

Beyond fostering peace, the project has been transformative for the Ambassadors themselves, enhancing their confidence and community engagement skills. Magaret, once shy and reserved, now stands as a vocal advocate for non-violent conflict resolution within her community.

As the day ends, the impact of Magaret and Desmond's efforts is clear. Their message is embraced with enthusiasm by their peers, leaving a resounding echo of 'Peace and One Love' in their wake. Their dedication is a testament to the strength of youth leadership in building a more peaceful society.

Cross-cutting considerations

UNICEF in Sierra Leone has been working to build internal capacity and that of GoSL and partners to foster an inclusive approach that integrates gender, social and behaviour change, adolescent participation, disability considerations, innovation and technology for development.

Particularly significant are youth-led initiatives, including in education and climate change. Strengthened youth engagement in climate change contributed to influential advocacy at COP28 in Dubai in December 2023. This type of collaboration with young leaders has set a precedent for youth involvement in policy-making and has become an integral part of UNICEF's cross-cutting considerations for sustainable development in Sierra Leone.

YOUTH-LED RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY ON CLIMATE-SMART EDUCATION

A group of nine youth advocates supported by UNICEF launched a programme aimed at increasing awareness of the need to integrate climate-smart education into the national education curriculum. They conducted research with students, teachers, parents and other community members to assess the level of awareness on climate risks and response in Sierra Leone. Interviews and discussions underscored the pressing need for climate-smart education in the country. Despite this, the perceived benefits and willingness of young people to engage in environmental initiatives highlighted the potential for transformative change through education.

In 2023, UNICEF utilized humanitarian response platforms for cross-sector collaboration and improved multisectoral strategy coordination through various structures such as the Donor Coordination Committee, Technical Working Groups and Steering Committees. In an environment free of major emergencies in 2023, these concerted efforts underscore the organization's resilience and adaptability.

Lessons learned from the Giga project aimed at providing Internet connectivity to schools, which, despite challenges, marked a partial success and valuable learning for future projects.

UNICEF has a people-centric approach at its core, including human-centred design and community-led methods. Grounded in social behaviour change, this has contributed to results across sectors, ranging from vaccination uptake to transformation of social norms. Overall, the strong strategic communication across programmes has extended the reach of UNICEF's advocacy for child rights, significantly extending its influence and that of its partners in Sierra Leone.

These initiatives underscore UNICEF's role in leveraging partnerships, technical expertise and innovative approaches to improve child survival rates, enhance education access and protect children from violence and exploitation – and to bring in actual change.

Operations and supplies

UNICEF Sierra Leone's supply and logistics work drives change for children and young people every day, across the country. UNICEF works with governments, partners and suppliers to plan, procure and deliver the right products at the right time, at the right price, while developing sustainable supply solutions.

Provision of UNICEF procurement services, technical support and guidance on procurement and supply chain systems strengthening to partners and government counterparts in 2023 enabled timely delivery of strategic commodities to complement programme supplies for the benefit of children in need, including large scale-procurement and delivery of routine immunization and malaria vaccines, nutrition and pharmaceutical supplies.

Supply chain management: UNICEF implemented sustainable supply solutions through emergency preparedness, prepositioning, warehousing strategies, end-user monitoring and fostering local market capacities. This enhanced supply chain systems, ensuring the timely delivery of supplies and programme benefits for children.

UN collaboration and other partnerships

In 2023, UNICEF continued to exert influence and achieve social development results through strategic partnerships. UNICEF Sierra Leone's collaboration was pivotal in advancing children's welfare and rights, through a comprehensive approach to leveraging resources, expertise and networks.

The key highlights of UNICEF's collaboration and partnerships are as follows.

UN COLLABORATION AND GOVERNANCE

- UN governance and coordination: UNICEF capitalized on its strong brand and track record to actively participate in UN governance, coordination and technical groups, showcasing leadership in the UN Programme Management Team, monitoring and evaluation, and communications. As chair and co-chair of several groups, including Results Group 3 and the Emergency Preparedness and Response Group, UNICEF played a crucial role in rolling out key joint UN priority and visibility events. This included Steering Committee participation for the evaluation of the UNSDCF 2020–2023 and developing the Common Country Assessment for the UNSDCF 2025–2030.
- Promoting peaceful elections: Collaborating with UNDP through a joint programme funded by the Peacebuilding Fund, UNICEF aimed to foster an environment conducive to peaceful elections in June 2023. Furthermore, UNICEF continued its Global Programme to End Child Marriage with UNFPA, worked on GBVIMS+ and e-RPW and initiated a new joint programme with UNDP and UNFPA to enhance disability inclusion.

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS FOR ENHANCED IMPACT

- UNICEF increased its public sector collaboration, which is also reflected by a revenue increase of 7%, from $25.8 million in 2022 to $27.7 million in 2023. This was achieved by maintaining and diversifying partnerships with bilateral donors, international financial institutions and National Committees. Initiatives included new engagements with AfDB and ECOWAS, emphasizing UNICEF's role in advocacy, procurement and supply chain management and confirming UNICEF as a preferred partner in Sierra Leone.
- GoSL co-financed nutrition, contributing $99,000 to the Nutrition Match Fund for treating.
- UNICEF's engagement with the Ministry of Finance led to the development of a handbook on child-responsive budgeting, with a view to strengthening social spending for children.
- GoSL co-financed nutrition, contributing $99,000 to the Nutrition Match Fund for treating.
- UNICEF leveraged partnerships with Gavi, the Global Fund and USAID to increase vaccine availability and strengthen supply chains.
- UNICEF's technical collaboration with the private sector continued, particularly in innovation, technology development, supply and procurement.
- UNICEF partnered with credible international consortia for independent evaluations and engaged individual consultants for research, studies and surveys. This included facilitating government participation with UNICEF China on a technical study visit as part of South–South Cooperation.

INTEGRATING PROGRAMMES AND MULTISECTORAL COORDINATION

- Successful multisectoral partnerships with government ministries and agencies, especially in areas like WASH, demonstrated UNICEF's ability to coordinate and integrate programmes, emphasizing the pivotal role of partnerships in achieving impactful results.

These collaborations and partnerships underscore UNICEF's strategic approach to leveraging its expertise, resources and networks to advocate for child rights, mobilize resources and convene stakeholders for the development and well-being of children in Sierra Leone. Through these efforts, UNICEF continues to influence policy, enhance advocacy and ensure integrated and impactful interventions across various sectors.

Main development partners

Development partners supporting UNICEF Sierra Leone

Gavi The Vaccine Alliance

GPE Transforming Education

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Government of Iceland

USAID FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

中国援助 CHINA AID FOR SHARED FUTURE

From the People of Japan

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE
Liberté
Égalité
Fraternité

UKaid from the British people

KOREA Sharing Hope Sharing Future

Irish Aid
Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

United Nations MPTF Office

IsDB البنك الإسلامي للتنمية Islamic Development Bank

THE WORLD BANK

THE GLOBAL FUND

JICA

Our UNICEF National Committee partners

Belgium

Finland

France

Germany

Italy

Japan

Norway

Spain

Sweden

United Kingdom

United States of America

Acknowledgements and thanks

To the Government of Sierra Leone, our esteemed donors and partners and the National Committees, your dedication and generous contributions have enabled significant advancements in health, education and child protection. Your partnership is the cornerstone of our progress.

To our parents and caregivers, your role in nurturing and safeguarding your children is pivotal. Your involvement in our programmes has made our achievements possible.

To our resilient children and youth, your spirit and engagement are the driving forces behind our actions. You are not just beneficiaries but active participants in shaping a brighter future.

Thank you for being an integral part of our journey. Together, we are creating lasting impacts in the lives of children and families across Sierra Leone.

Looking forward

In 2024, UNICEF Sierra Leone is set to continue to support the Government of Sierra Leone to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs by 2030. The focus will be on developing internal capacity and enhancing programme and operational effectiveness to support the government and partners more effectively.

Working in alignment with the government will ensure child rights are integrated across Sierra Leone's development agenda. Key areas of focus include sharpening the geographic focus nationally and at the district level; integrating public financing for children; addressing climate change; fostering adolescent participation; promoting the inclusion of children living with disabilities; and enhancing gender equality across programme sectors.

UNICEF plans to expand its partnership base for increased advocacy and resource mobilization. This includes investing in evidence generation through conducting the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS 7).

The new Government of Sierra Leone and UNICEF Country Programme of Cooperation development process offers a distinct moment for reflection and an opportunity to refine our strategies to ensure enhanced coordination, planning and implementation. For Every Child.

Credits

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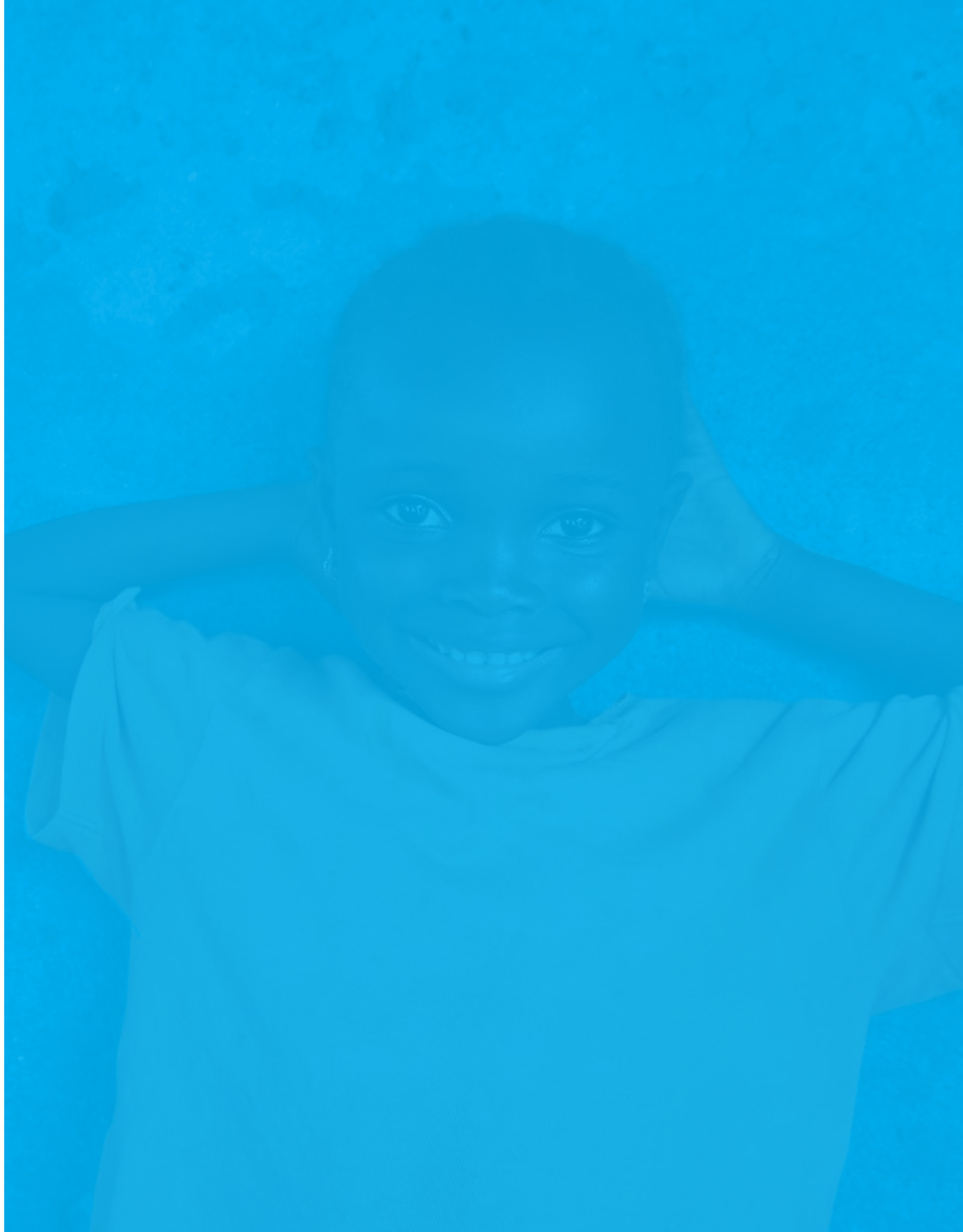

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