

## Armenia

### Update on the context and situation of children

The overall context was defined by repeated escalations which have continued since the tripartite statement was signed between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia following the 2020 conflict, resulting in population displacement into Armenia or the risk thereof, as well as impacting communities in border areas. In addition, the escalation of war in Ukraine had a socioeconomic impact on Armenia. The COVID-19 pandemic situation stabilized with less cases reported weekly and less fatal cases. Economic growth is estimated to reach around 13% of GDP for 2022 thereby exceeding all predictions. While the annual inflation rate is at 8.3% compared to 2021, prices for food and beverages increased by 10%, putting vulnerable groups of population at more risk.

Poverty rates for 2021 (reported in 2022) at the average poverty line largely remained the same at 26.5% (27% in 2020). Multi-dimensional poverty rate also decreased slightly to 18.7% compared to 19.1%. While the poverty rate at upper poverty line has decreased by almost 2 percentage points (at 45.7%), it has increased by 0.8 percentage point (at 10.5%) for lower poverty line and increased 2.1 times (at 1.5%) for extreme poverty. Child poverty rate has also increased to 35.3% by 1.4 percentage points. In 2021 children accounted for 28.7% of all cases of multi-dimensional poverty (22.3% in 2020). Those figures indicate that vulnerable groups were disproportionately more affected by the socio-economic consequences of multiple crises in the country and region. As per assessment of the impact of Ukraine crisis on the country, poverty may have increased by 1.8 percentage points in 2022 disproportionately affecting families with children and other vulnerable groups.

Public spending on health and education has decreased by 0.1 percentage point compared to the previous year respectively at 2.3% and 2.7% of GDP, however an improvement compared to 2018. Public spending on social security remained at 8.9% after an increase from 7% in 2018-19. Important reforms are underway in both the health and education sectors with potential to increase public spending in these sectors.

Sex ratio at birth has improved significantly at 1.08 boys born for every girl, approaching the normal range at 1.04-1.06 as per WHO. While sex ratio at birth for first and second child is at 1.03, it is still skewed for third (1.21) and fourth (1.29) child indicating sex-selection. Those figures shall be seen in broader context of gender inequalities in the country. According to results of a survey by the Statistical Committee of Armenia, 14.8% of 15-59 y.o. women were subject to physical violence by intimate partner.

The number of children in residential care institutions remained the same in recent years despite recurring crises situations, which can be attributed to ongoing improvements in case management and alternative care, as well as increased coverage of community-based child and family support services. State financing for foster care and community-based services for 2023 increased significantly, including 2-fold increase for foster care and 5-fold increase for outsourcing services to local CSOs to ensure countrywide coverage.

The enrolment of children in preschools (public and private) during 2021-2022 school year increased (32.3%) in comparison with the previous year (24.3%) but remained lower compared with the pre-COVID situation (34.7%). Gross enrolment ratio in schools constituted 83.1% (93.0%, – in primary schools, 91.2% – in basic schools, 55.9% – in high schools) with continued decline in high school enrolment compared to 2021 indicator of 57.9%. 27% of children in Armenia at late primary age are not proficient in reading, 16.8 percentage points higher than the average for the Europe and Central Asia region.

The number of registered cases of childhood disabilities is on the rise compared to 2020-2021 data, and the actual number may be even higher due to underreporting and identification issues.

A new State Program for Development of Education till 2030 was approved and the work on the costed action plan was initiated, informed by extensive analytical work and technical support through UNICEF. The regulatory framework for ensuring inclusive early childhood education and regulations

for functional assessment of children with disabilities were enhanced. The funding scheme for inclusion in public schools was revised to include considerations of reasonable accommodation. Infant mortality decreased to 6.9 per 1000 live births in 2021 compared to 7.4 in 2020, with notably significant decrease registered among rural population (7.6 compared to 10.1 per 1000 live births). Decrease in child mortality was insignificant at 8.1 per 1000 live births compared to 8.2 in 2020. Maternal mortality has increased to 43.7 per 100.000 live births compared to 22.0 in 2020 with significant increase registered in urban areas (35.0 in 2021 vs 11.8 in 2020). Over 90% vaccination coverage was sustained for all antigens also with UNICEF intensive support to the national immunization programme.

The Armenian Mental Health Coalition was established in 2022 and the Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2026, also reflecting child and adolescents' mental health issues, were developed and approved by MOH.

The first ever Labour and Social Protection Umbrella Strategy for Armenia for 2022-2026 including SDG-aligned and gender-responsive results framework and costing was developed and is awaiting approval, while results of the review and evaluability assessment of the National Strategic Program for Child Protection were finalized to inform the new comprehensive programme.

The Law on Social Assistance, the new draft Law on the Rights of the Child and Child Protection System and the Family Code, as well as related legal documents, were thoroughly revised to ensure better alignment and coherence between these three landmark pieces of legislation, harmonize the provisions and better reflect international commitments and ongoing reform processes, including notions of professional social work, integration of services, child protection mechanisms, roles and responsibilities, rapid response and flexibility arrangements at times of crises. Those are being finalized based on feedback from public discussions and government institutions.

Finally, Armenia has ratified the Optional Protocol of CRPD on Monitoring the Implementation of the Convention in 2022.

## Major contributions and drivers of results

2022 was the first full year of implementation of the 2021-2025 Country Programme approved by the Executive Board in October 2021, which is aligned with the 2021-2025 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. Although the Socio-Economic Response and Recovery Plan and the Inter-Agency Response Plan addressing the effects of COVID-19 and the impacts of the 2020 conflict respectively were formally discontinued in December 2021, UNICEF continued to implement activities for the response to these two emergencies while also responding to new emergency like situations related to the September military escalation on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as the developments around the Lachin corridor in December. This combination of multiple crises coupled with the effects of the escalation of war in Ukraine continued to create new challenges for children in Armenia. UNICEF Armenia continuously adjusted its programme to address these emerging needs while also advancing on the longer-term development agenda.

A wide range of strategies was employed, from financial, technical, and in-kind support for direct service delivery, to communication for social and behavioural change, evidence-based advocacy and expert policy advice aimed at strengthening national and local systems to better serve vulnerable children. In this mix, emergency-type and development activities were implemented in a complementary manner in the spirit of the 'humanitarian-development nexus'. An example is the role UNICEF played in integrating shock-responsiveness considerations in the ongoing reforms in multiple social sectors.

After the first full year of implementation of the Country Programme, some progress in the situation of children can be observed and partially attributed to UNICEF's and government and non-government partners' efforts to ensure that all children living in Armenia equally enjoy their rights to survive, thrive, learn, be protected and participate. Routine vaccination coverage was sustained at more than 90% for all antigens thanks to the improvements in the national immunization programme and delivery systems as well as to the communication efforts to counter growing vaccine hesitancy. Following a

decline during the COVID-19 period, preschool enrollment increased by eight percentage points showing positive trends also in rural areas, as a result of continuous investment and capacity building. The number of children in residential care did not increase despite the multiple socio-economic shocks described above that disproportionately affected vulnerable families. This can be attributed to the ongoing improvements in case management, alternatives to residential care, and accessibility of community-based child and family support services. The range of participation and positive engagement mechanisms for adolescents and young people increased, including a growing number of youth centers and an expanding network of young activists on climate change who were also represented in the Armenian delegation to COP27. The National Commission on Protection of the Rights of the Child is now functional.

The ongoing wave of national reforms in multiple social sectors is a unique opportunity to address key systemic bottlenecks hindering the realization of child rights. In this context, good progress was made this year in developing or reviewing a broad spectrum of legislative and policy frameworks as well as strategies and costed action plans, thus setting the foundations for measures that will enhance national systems in multiple sectors. The State Education Development Programme until 2030 was approved by the Parliament. The first ever Labour and Social Protection Umbrella Strategy for Armenia covering the period 2022-2026 is awaiting approval and so are the new Law on Social Assistance as well as the comprehensive legislative package including the new Law on Child Rights and Child Protection and the amendments to the Family Code and to other legislative acts. The new national Strategy on Mental Health, the revised Law on Disaster Risk Management (DRM) and Population Protection and the new national DRM Strategy were formulated with tailored provisions for children and adolescents and approved. The reform plan for pediatric primary health care included key provisions to address documented bottlenecks. A breakthrough decision was taken to prioritize and develop a new national policy framework on youth. UNICEF's contribution included advocacy, expert advice, evidence generation including analysis from the costing and fiscal sustainability perspective, as well as leveraging of its recognized convening role to enable multi-sectoral coordination and broad consensus within and across sectors. UNICEF efforts also aimed at ensuring these reforms are responsive to gender considerations and to the needs of children with disabilities.

In parallel, substantial steps forward were made towards operationalizing policies and legislative provisions and strengthening systems at central and local levels to ensure upgraded, more integrated and inclusive delivery of services for children and families in multiple social sectors. The review of the vulnerability assessment system for poverty-targeted benefits for families and children undertaken by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), UNICEF and the World Bank, resulted in a concept note outlining the transition from a proxy-means testing to a hybrid means testing model of targeting for better outcomes. This was accompanied by econometric simulations, financial scenario-building and estimations.

The findings of the UNICEF-supported costing of primary healthcare (PHC) versus hospital services provided to newborns and young children informed recommendations on introducing effective payment mechanisms and revising allocations to PHC from the state budget. UNICEF-generated evidence was used to inform decisions related to reforming neonatal health services. A package of clinical protocols and guidelines on management of common neonatal illnesses and management of nutritional needs of children born with low-birthweight and sick children was updated and over 80% of relevant PHC providers nationwide were trained on these tools.

Capitalizing on the momentum created by recent crises, UNICEF advocacy and technical support contributed to maintain mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS) high on the national agenda and strengthen capacity in multiple sectors. The Armenian Mental Health Coalition was established, and a mapping of child and adolescent mental health services provided recommendations to upgrade these services in the health sector. New clinical modules and guidelines on basic aspects of child and adolescent mental health were developed and training of PHC providers and narrow specialists started. In parallel, professional literature on psycho-social support (PSS) was produced and social service workforce (SSW) professionals and community-based peer support volunteers continued to be trained. The e-learning platform for SSW professionals was enhanced with additional materials. Positive parenting was promoted throughout the country, ensuring participation of vulnerable parents in face-to-

face and online programmes.

UNICEF advocacy led to agreement between relevant institutions on the establishment of the Barnahus model to enable holistic provision of specialized services for child victims of crime. Preparations for the pilot phase started and key steps for its operationalization were taken, including revision of regulations and capacity development. UNICEF's continuous advocacy contributed to a significant increase in state funding for alternatives to institutionalization and community-based day-care services for 2023. In parallel, the partnership with relevant ministries, local authorities and CSOs led to the expansion of technical and infrastructural capacity of community-based services for children and youth. Five state-run child and family support centers (with annual capacity for 2,000 children) were refurbished in six out of ten regions and the capital. Eight child-friendly spaces were established (with annual capacity for up to 2,500 children and adolescents) and equipped with tools to organize child and adolescent-friendly activities including PSS and non-formal education opportunities.

With UNICEF support, the policy framework for the operationalization of the National Commission on Protection of the Rights of the Child was updated in line with the vision of the draft legal framework and adopted by MoLSA. The capacity of the Human Rights Defender's Office's (HRDO) Child Rights Unit was expanded via technical assistance and guidance on development of the alternative report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The first ever Adolescent and Youth Council was established under HRDO and took up its role of providing a child and adolescent perspective on child rights issues in the country. As a result of the partnership with the Ministry of Environment, the Armenia delegation to COP27 included two young delegates who represented youth and adolescent climate champions from the country. This contributed to amplify children's and youth voices and their engagement capacity within the climate action agenda in Armenia.

The UPSHIFT initiative, with direct and active engagement of adolescents and young people, provided expanded opportunities for non-formal education (NFE) especially in peripheral areas of the country with less NFE options. According to UNICEF and partners' observations, it led to increased ownership, commitment, and confidence among adolescents to be more active citizens in their communities. With the aim to expand opportunities for adolescent girls and women to access rights-based and evidence-based content on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and protection, efforts continued to enhance the SafeYOU mobile app – an innovative tool in the fight against GBV developed in partnership with the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women, the Child Protection Network, UNFPA and the Impact Innovation Institute.

With regards to formal education, the findings of a series of UNICEF-commissioned studies analyzing key aspects of the education system informed the development of the State Education Development Programme and related reforms. The UNICEF-commissioned independent appraisal of the Programme drew attention to the need to put in place a clear monitoring and accountability mechanism, differentiate state and external funding to identify funding gaps, and assess risks to implementation and define mitigation plans. Steps forward were made to address gender bias in the school curriculum, through a gamified resource pack for history teachers in general secondary schools, which was adopted by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports (MoESCS). In the framework of the 2021-2026 Government Programme which aims at establishing/renovating 500 preschools by 2026, 15 new alternative preschools were established with UNICEF support in rural settlements benefitting 256 children 3-6 years old (over 50% girls). In partnership with the Republican Pedagogical and Psychological Support Center, the pedagogical-psychological support system for children with special educational needs and children with disabilities was strengthened. MoLSA developed several regulatory acts to operationalize the reform of the Disability Assessment System and introduce the Functional Assessment of Disability taking into consideration child-related aspects.

Preliminary agreement was reached with relevant government entities on conducting the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey in 2024, which will allow the country to update and expand survey-based child-related data currently dating back to 2016. A UNICEF-supported joint review of administrative data on children in residential institutions and children with disabilities revealed gaps in reporting and recommended mechanisms to correct this and ensure completeness and accuracy of data.

In parallel to the efforts to advance on the longer-term development agenda, UNICEF had to support the response to emergency-like situations related to the multiple crises mentioned previously. Given

the recurrent nature of such crises, UNICEF Armenia integrated its programming with emergency preparedness approaches to ensure that national systems and local service providers, especially in concerned border regions, are better equipped to respond. In the framework of the social protection reform process, UNICEF supported the integration of provisions aimed at enhancing the shock-responsiveness of the system, including the development of MoLSA's needs assessment tool for emergencies. In addition, thirteen government and non-government child and adolescent-friendly spaces, two including crisis centers, were equipped to provide age-appropriate PSS and child protection services during emergencies. Ten mobile pediatric units were created to ensure better coverage of border villages and communities hosting displaced population. To ensure education continuity in safe and enabling environments in border areas, twenty-eight schools developed Disaster Risk Mitigation plans, were equipped with emergency response materials and received First Aid and PSS trainings. Thirteen schools and three kindergartens were supported to expand their infrastructural capacity to host displaced children. Safe rooms of 20 border settlements were equipped with child- and family-friendly materials. NGO partners' capacity to assess and manage cases of children affected by emergencies from the child protection perspective was expanded. This mechanism was used to complement MoLSA's response in the September escalation as well as to address the needs of the children stranded in Armenia due to the developments around the Lachin corridor. All children identified through this mechanism were also provided with vouchers to purchase winter clothes and recreational items as well as school bags and stationery to support their temporary placement in schools in Armenia.

As a result of UNICEF's contribution at the frontline of the COVID-19 response, over 90% of the regional branches of the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and PHC facilities were equipped with more than 800 different cold chain items and almost 70% of relevant health specialists nationwide were capacitated on COVID-19 vaccination roll-out and management of adverse events following immunization (AEFI). The COVID-19 vaccination AEFI reporting mechanism was improved through its integration into the overall NCDC immunization reporting system. In addition, promotion of the immunization and vaccination programme, including COVID-19 vaccination roll-out, was intensified to re-build trust towards immunization and mitigate the impact of antivaccination movements. In parallel, the capacity of the Ministry of Health and NCDC for risk communication and monitoring through social listening platforms was expanded. Through content produced together with healthcare professionals and complemented with Facebook Lives with them, UNICEF achieved 2,900,000 social media impressions, 95,041 engagements, and 349,959 video views.

Given the significant psychological effects all these crises have on children and their families, the above-mentioned efforts to strengthen MHPSS capacity of national and local systems were complemented with awareness raising through television and digital channels, engaging experts and influencers. During the Parenting month, UNICEF reached 592,241 impressions on social media, promoting the culture of self-care and mental health among women and mothers.

Finally, UNICEF Armenia monitored the socio-economic effects of the Ukraine crisis on children in Armenia and used its findings to inform the ongoing reform process of the social protection system. The Country Programme was implemented with an annual financial expenditure of USD 7.1 million. Appreciation of the local currency coupled with adverse euro-dollar exchange rate fluctuations had significant impact on expenditures and on the real value of funding, which affected implementation. Effective implementation of the programme was possible thanks to the coordinated efforts of the programmes, operations, communications and monitoring and evaluation teams comprised of 40 staff members, including a long-term consultant ensuring permanent UNICEF presence in Syunik region for the first time. The commitment of UNICEF Armenia's staff in the face of all the challenges related to the recurrent tensions and their impact not only on children but also their own lives played a key role. Considerable attention was paid to ensuring staff wellbeing as a critical asset for the Country Office with a dedicated action plan, a retreat and regular formal and informal gatherings. Measures included flexible working arrangements, provision for safe return to office-based work, opportunities for psychosocial support and more systematically planned annual leaves.

## UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

In 2022, UNICEF continued to rely on resource mobilization from institutional donors (EU, ADA, USA, Russian Federation) to generate resources for the implementation of the Country Programme. The country office also made efforts to identify opportunities with the private sector, including from the diaspora, to contribute to the unfinished child rights agenda in Armenia.

Scaling up the overall engagement with the private sector continued to be a challenge in 2022 however, given the impact of the conflict in 2020 and subsequent escalations on public sentiment towards the UN and wider international community.

UNICEF engaged Synergy International and StartUp Foundation to support young people through the Generation Unlimited partnership, together with UNDP, UNFPA and UN Armenia. Considerable pro-bono support was also galvanized from the private sector for the establishment of child-friendly safe spaces and youth houses.

UNICEF was able to continue and expand its partnership with the Armenian community of Argentina with the support of Argentina country office, raising funds for child protection, adolescent development and education.

The office established a successful partnership with the Public TV of Armenia, co-producing two parenting master classes with two prominent experts and 16 episodes as a dedicated segment of the nationally aired early prime-time Healthy Lifestyle show. The episodes focused on mental health and positive parenting issues, including in emergency situations.

UNICEF also advocated for climate action, partnering with young climate activists before and after COP27, resulting in the commitment from the Government to sign the Declaration on children, youth, and climate action.

In December, UNICEF appointed Junior Eurovision 2021 winner Malena, 16, as a new National Ambassador, engaging her earlier in World Children's Day activities with the Human Rights Defender's office to launch HRDO Child and Youth Advisory Council, a milestone for children's participation in Armenia. Through the efforts with the European Broadcasting Union and Public TV, Malena was later able to congratulate UNICEF on its anniversary and talk about her work with UNICEF from the stage of the 20th Junior Eurovision Song Contest. The live jubilee show had 33 million viewers across 13 countries.

In risk communication, UNICEF brought together USAID, WHO, MOH, NCDC, and MESCS to disseminate information about the regional HealthBuddy+ web-based application, reaching all public middle and high schools in Armenia, as well as higher academic institutions.

In the scope of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2021-2025, UNICEF contributes to seven out of eight outcomes and, within these, actively participates in eleven UN Joint Programmes. UNICEF facilitates inter-agency collaboration as chair of UNSDCF Result Group 1 on People's Wellbeing, and co-chair of the UN Communications Group. This year, UNICEF promoted and participated in the development process of the inter-agency contingency plan and deepened its collaboration with UNHCR and WFP, which led to more coordinated actions in response to recent emergency like situations. UNICEF contributed to preparation of UNCT SWAP Gender Scorecard Annual progress report, as well as to preparation of the CEDAW report.

## Lessons Learned and Innovations

2022 was the first full year of implementation of the new Country Programme which also coincided with the first full year of the new Government and a series of parallel reform processes. All of this, coupled with the multiple crises already described, made for a very complex and dynamic context within which UNICEF Armenia had to continuously adapt its programming approach. From this experience, several lessons learnt, and innovative approaches emerged.

Conscious investment of time and other resources in emergency preparedness was critical to improve the CO's capacity to respond in a timely and effective way to the recurring emergency situations. The



comprehensive emergency preparedness exercise conducted by UNICEF Armenia with support by ECARO and EMOPS resulted in several measures being put in place, particularly staff capacity building, clear definition of roles and responsibilities, supply stockpiling, and establishment of contingency humanitarian programme documents. This enabled the CO to significantly increase its response capacity. When developments around the Lachin corridor resulted in some children being stranded in Armenia, UNICEF was the first responder for management of child protection cases and distribution of vouchers for clothing, thus marking a clear improvement in the timeliness and effectiveness of the response. This experience led to the recognition that Armenia's particular situation requires constant attention and investment in emergency preparedness actions with conscious involvement of all staff. With this awareness, the CO will continue actions in this direction also in 2023. This also led UNICEF Armenia to be one of the strong promoters of updating the UN inter-agency contingency plan and defining key priorities to concretely improve inter-agency response capacity.

In connection to this, UNICEF Armenia also realized the importance of having a foot on the ground in border areas that are likely to be most affected by emergencies linked to recurrent tensions following the 2020 conflict. For the first time the CO – with ECARO and EMOPS financial support – established permanent presence in Syunik, one of the impacted border regions and the only entry point into Armenia through the Lachin corridor. The first three months of experience with this modality have already shown the benefits of this presence in terms of significantly increased capacity to constantly monitor the situation as well as improved partnerships and understanding of the dynamics between the stakeholders in the region. The Country Office will therefore seek resources to strengthen this presence.

Over the last several years, UNICEF programming in Armenia focused on strengthening national systems for better outcomes for children as often required in middle income country contexts. In implementing the humanitarian response to multiple crises, besides adopting typical emergency-type approaches based on direct service delivery, UNICEF Armenia leveraged the already established expertise and partnerships and supported the adjustment of national systems. The humanitarian response was therefore mainstreamed in the implementation of the overall programme and in some cases merged with development programming. In line with the humanitarian-development nexus' principle, this innovative approach for the Armenia context enabled an immediate response to urgent humanitarian needs while building a response through established national systems, thus ensuring greater sustainability and at-scale results. In this context, UNICEF Armenia leveraged its expertise and recognized advisory role to promote integration of shock-responsive considerations in the ongoing reform processes in multiple social sectors. An example of it is the integration of specific provisions to assess the needs and target children and families affected by emergencies within the new national Social Protection Strategy.

Another key lesson learnt relates to the need to continue working even more intensely on strengthening cross-sectoral linkages and promoting coordination mechanisms to address the needs of different categories of vulnerable children in an integrated manner. UNICEF's convening role was re-confirmed this year and its unique added value was recognized in a context where inter-sectoral coordination remains a critical bottleneck for policy making and implementation. UNICEF CO played a critical role in enabling clear communication between different sectors/ministries about the alignment of various interventions in respective sectors with each other and connecting those in terms of timing and scope under the umbrella of a broader vision linked to the ongoing multi-sectoral reforms. As an example, efforts to strengthen community-based family and child support centres/crisis centres managed by MoLSA were linked to the process of establishment of pilot Barnahus facilities by MoJ. As a result, a momentum of united political will was created and UNICEF-coordinated cooperation is currently happening between three ministries and sectors (social services, justice and law enforcement) to bring Barnahus to life. In the coming years it will be important to capitalize on this recognized added value by UNICEF while also ensuring coordination becomes an institutionalized practice in the broader child protection system.

Another UNICEF-supported initiative aimed at promoting inter-sectoral coordination, the national Strategic Programme of the Protection of Child Rights 2017-2021, was the object of a review and

evaluability assessment this year, which generated important lessons learnt. The review commissioned by UNICEF in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs revealed shortcomings related to the strategy design and monitoring, which affected effectiveness of implementation. The findings were discussed by the National Commission on Protection of the Rights of the Child and were considered in developing the new approach on planning and monitoring for the new Law on Child Rights.

Another important lesson learnt relates to the work on behavioral change and social norms. Especially with the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing need to support national partners in effectively and rapidly communicating key messages to the public, communication for behavioural change has become an increasingly critical programmatic strategy for UNICEF in Armenia. To address this need, this year the CO recruited a dedicated Behavioural and Social Change Officer.