

Azerbaijan

Update on the context and situation of children

In 2022, UNICEF continued to focus its efforts on strengthening services, strategies and structures in support of the most vulnerable and under-served children and families. Topics of particular importance were the return of Internally Displaced People, the Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey, and climate change.

The Government of Azerbaijan gave top priority to accelerating its plans for the return of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) to the districts in and around Karabakh with the first 326 IDPs (66 families) returned in 2022. Considering the very large scale of explosive ordnance contamination in and around Karabakh, and the risk to children and their families, UNICEF prioritized its support to the Government on Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) activities, in tandem with de-mining that is led by other international organizations. UNICEF also supported Mental Health and Psycho-social Support capacities of schoolteachers and school psychologists to provide continuous psychological support to children and adolescents affected by the 2020 armed conflict.

Reliable and representative data are essential for evidence-based policy and advocacy for children. Therefore, the launch of the preparatory work for the Multi-indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) was a major highlight for UNICEF and the Government of Azerbaijan in 2022. There was high interest and commitment from the Government, as reflected by the Cabinet of Ministers' decree dated 17 August 2022 (#526s) on the establishment of the MICS Steering Committee, and the inclusion of the MICS into the State Program on Development of Official Statistics in the Republic of Azerbaijan 2018-2025. Along with the State Statistical Committee, UNICEF prepared the now approved MICS Action Plan, budget and questionnaire. UNICEF also purchased all MICS equipment, updated maps and household lists of the selected 626 clusters, and successfully conducted questionnaire pre-testing. 2022 also marked the inclusion of Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in all the preparatory work, highlighting the Autonomous Republic's commitment to conducting this survey, considering its important role in reporting for the SDGs, and to the situation of children across Azerbaijan.

In 2022, recognizing the growing threat of climate change to children in Azerbaijan and in line with the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025, UNICEF Azerbaijan developed its internal strategy to integrate climate change and environmental health (CEH) in the UNICEF Azerbaijan Country Programme. The strategy laid objectives to be achieved in 2022 and 2023. In 2022, climate change and environmental health have been mainstreamed in the Country Programme, most notably in Health through the healthcare waste management assessment, and Social Policy through the shock-responsive social protection. Government and development partners also collaborated with UNICEF on climate action, most notably the Ministry of Ecology and the Azerbaijan State Museum of Art.

The implementation of the Country Programme took place in an environment in which the country continued to report economic growth, with an increase in GDP of 4.8 per cent between January and November 2022 as per the State Statistical Committee. The surge in global oil prices has led to a boost in Azerbaijan's export earnings and strengthening the nation's capacity to offset the exposure to the ongoing external shocks. However, rising prices for fertilizers and food, which accelerated because of the Ukraine crisis, remains a challenge for the most vulnerable. The official inflation rate averaged 13.8 per cent, and 20.2 percent for food between January and November 2022, which is a significant increase from previous years.

2022 also witness the launch of Azerbaijan's 2022-2026 Socio-Economic Development Strategy for a "powerful state and a high well-being society", approved by the President. It set out the important

indicators, milestones, and activities for the upcoming five years, covering Child Protection, Social Policy, Health, Education and Climate Change. It will also ensure sustainable growth with a focus on innovation, investment in human capital, and welfare for the future of the country, especially young people. The key areas of the strategy include increasing the provision of sustainable social services to vulnerable population groups, therefore expanding rehabilitation centers networks to support people with disabilities. In line with UNICEF's shock-responsive social protection priority, this creates additional social protection opportunities for low-income populations ensuring protection in potential crisis situations, including pandemics and other man-made or natural disasters.

The strategy aims to further expand access to Early Childhood Care and Education, improve the quality of general education by expanding the scope of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) education and network of vocational classes and inclusive education, in addition to expanding the scope of vocational education. Despite the impact of the pandemic, all educational institutions continued to be open for onsite learning all through 2022. However, learning gaps do exist, and UNICEF continues to work closely with the MoSE to support learning recovery of the most vulnerable children in the selected areas.

The development of human resources, modernization of infrastructure and strengthening of the medical supply system to provide necessary healthcare to pregnant women and newborns was also clearly highlighted in the strategy, which can be attributed to UNICEF's years-long advocacy and close work with the Ministry of Health and other players in the health sector. UNICEF in 2022 prioritized the capacity building of healthcare workers and undertook healthcare waste management assessments, and will go beyond assessments in 2023 and the years to come. Promoting healthy lifestyle and eating for children and young people is another major priority of the strategy, materialized through the school nutrition project initiated in partnership with the Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency (AFSA) and the Ministry of Science and Education (MoSE).

Based on the SSC data, over the last 10 years, some progress has been made with improving the sex ratio at birth but that it is still far too high (in 2021, 115.5 boys per 100 girls) compared to the biological ratio (105 boys per 100 girls). Azerbaijan continues to have the worst ratio globally.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Every child survives and thrives

Access to essential maternal and child health services was extended through successful pilot on universal-progressive home visiting that reached 10,933 families and covered 19,575 of 0-3 aged children and 2,255 pregnant women in 4 districts. New guidance on home visiting services was adopted by the Ministry of Health to support the model's implementation. Healthcare authorities have adopted the model and a plan was elaborated on its phased roll-out with continuous technical support from UNICEF. Already 582 healthcare workers received training on home visiting and 732 are providing services that cover 34,337 children and 9,022 pregnant women in Ganja and Shirvan cities, Absheron, Agjabadi, Shamakhi, Guba and Barda districts. All caregivers in these families receive Early Childhood Development (ECD) counselling and other services included in the model. Azerbaijan has showcased this success during a recent regional workshop organized by UNICEF, WHO Europe and International Step by Step Association (ISSA). The training programme on home visiting has been sustained in the curricula of 8 Medical Colleges and the online ECD resource hub. Facebook and Instagram initiatives for parents education and ECD promotion and counselling were established, reaching more than 21,000 users.

The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) was scaled-up with TABIB – 380 healthcare workers were trained across 16 maternity. Nine successfully implemented all 10 BFHI Steps, constituting 9.8

per cent of all maternity wards in the country. This initiative contributes to gender-responsive action.

The neonatal screening programme was rolled-out in Azerbaijan with UNICEF's support for capacity building of healthcare workers in districts. Since June 6,400 newborns had a heel prick test.

The school nutrition initiative was implemented in partnership with the Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency (AFSA) and the Ministry of Education. 30 Baku schools benefited from training school marshals on healthy and safe nutrition, consequent nutrition awareness raising among school-aged children on healthy diets and monitoring of school canteens. The initiative had a significant impact on children's nutrition knowledge and patterns - skipping breakfast was reduced from 20 per cent to 7 per cent, and daily sweets intake was reduced from 36 per cent to 13 per cent.

A Healthcare Waste Management assessment covering Baku city and 6 districts was conducted for planning sustainable and context-specific solutions for healthcare waste management at primary healthcare facilities. Currently, the data is being analyzed, fitting well in the upcoming joint UNICEF-WHO programme on strengthening Primary healthcare.

UNICEF also supported the strengthening of immunization services through jointly developing with WHO the national guidelines, advocating for analyzing recent vaccination coverage backsliding, and initiating the national workshop on routine immunization.

Every child learns

Access to quality inclusive school education was provided to 205 children with disabilities, including 94 girls, of age 6-12 through expanding inclusive education practices and capacities to 22 regular schools in 11 regions of Azerbaijan. The long-term negative impact of the pandemic and the military conflict on children and adolescents' learning, wellbeing and mental health in the conflict affected and other disadvantaged areas were reduced through targeted learning support and school-level mental health and psycho-social support capacity development of 2,000 schoolteachers supporting children's social and emotional learning skills and 200 school psychologists who developed their competencies in Psychological First Aid. To respond to the continuing learning recovery needs, UNICEF-supported Learning Recovery programme reaching 882 primary and secondary school students, including 473 boys and 409 girls, with the targeted learning catch-up support by the schoolteachers that resulted in enhanced learning results between 20% to 50. The needs of girls, children with special needs in education and other vulnerable children were addressed by both training programmes and the relevant school capacities enhanced. Over 120 adolescent girls from 5 regions have advanced their skills in STEAM, impacting their academic performance and guiding their career choices. Comprehensive analysis generated by the study on the quality of Early Childhood Education services informed adequate understanding and action design by the national partners for the systemic reform of the Early Childhood Education sub-sector in the country.

UNICEF continued supporting government institutions on strengthening their capacities to provide skills and competencies to adolescent girls and boys, to increase their resilience and support their smooth transition into a productive adulthood. For the purpose of further engaging more adolescents into UNICEF's Basic Life Skills Education (BLSE) programme, it was expanded to 38 regional platforms. The programme was also included into the personal development and career planning module of the Vocational Education and Training curriculum, reaching more than 20,000 young people in the 2021-2022 academic year. The UNICEF-supported skills programmes now also include Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics (STEM) at the formal education level, along with Digital Literacy skills at the informal education level, with both programmes having development interventions aimed at girls.

To further support youth participation and engagement in the matters affecting their lives, UNICEF

and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, along with the Executive Committees and Youth Institutions continued their assistance to Youth Advisory Councils (YAC) in 5 regions. Young people were engaged into participatory action for research with their peers in the regions to identify key obstacles in their communities, with the purpose of addressing them with solutions and seed-project fundings. In Bilasuvar, Gazakh and Tovuz, YAC and Youth Houses members placed bicycles in the park for use in exchange with plastics and other recyclable waste materials. In Shamkir, YAC members provided waste sorting containers and raised the awareness of the local community on the importance of reducing and recycling waste in 6 villages. Across three former line of contact districts, YAC members supported EORE for their peers and community members.

Within the framework of the assessment of Environmental situation in the country, multistakeholder analysis and consultations with youth, non-governmental organizations, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Ecology, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Health, European Union, United Nations agencies and other development partners took place that resulted into a strategy with a clear recommendation and guidance on strengthening youth capacities and engagement in climate change policy and action.

Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

UNICEF invested in strengthening systems for effective prevention of and response to violence against children through a series of technical assistance and advocacy initiatives during the reporting year. Piloting the Child Safeguarding mechanism in 25 schools of Baku city covered more than 27,000 children. Following the pilot project, UNICEF advocated and provided guidance for the establishment of child protection coordination group and referral procedures with the initiative of Baku city Education Department. Full application of the referral system will be further supported by UNICEF.

UNICEF, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice and NGO successfully piloted social services for 141 children under probation control and detention centers. The significant outcomes of the social services were highlighted in the round table focusing on the role of cross sectoral cooperation in child protection.

Continuous advocacy of UNICEF with the Ministry of Justice resulted in promotion of the Guidelines on child-friendly court room and child friendly communication and procedures in police, prosecution and judicial instances by the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan. UNICEF also completed the draft proposals to juvenile justice legislation and received feedback from the Ministry of Justice.

Partnership with the EU Delegation in Azerbaijan continued focusing on strengthening child protection and social protection systems for effective prevention of Violence Against Children for 2023-2025. New project proposal intends to intensify technical support to the government and CSO sector for improving national and local mechanisms of protection of children's rights.

Every child lives in a safe and clean environment

Further to the development of the UNICEF Azerbaijan's Strategy on Integrating Climate Change and Environmental Health (CEH) in the Country Programme and the objectives and achievements highlighted in the first section of this document, a study on youth and climate policy and action in Azerbaijan was conducted in 2022. The study focused on the engagement of children and youth in climate policy and action in Azerbaijan. It was undertaken between April and July 2022 with the primary objective of generating data that can be used as the basis for the UNICEF Azerbaijan Climate Change Strategy. The study revealed that the current policy framework of Azerbaijan provides a thin basis to promote and invest in children & youth and climate action, since their engagement is not explicitly mentioned in any of the national documents on climate change. It is also inadequately mainstreamed into sectoral policies critical to children and youth, type and scope of the activities

implemented by the diverse stakeholders are mainly ad-hoc lacking a coordinated collaboration. There is lack of long-term planning and strategy for sustainable climate policy and action, nevertheless, there is a great level of openness and willingness among the diverse stakeholders to work with children and youth in the context of climate policy and action. The study also produced an advocacy paper and guidance note to shape future interventions, including UNICEF's, in this direction.

An Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) Programme was implemented for children and families affected by the recent conflict with ECHO's financial and UNICEF's technical support in 2022. The main objective of the program was to provide evidence-based, high impact and lifesaving emergency support for children and families affected by the escalation of the conflict in and beyond the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. The Programme was implemented in the 10 conflict-affected districts which include 80 communities while supporting the training of 1,002 teachers in 97 schools and 523 community leaders and volunteers on facilitating community and school-based EORE activities. More than 121,000 local people including 43,000 children received EORE through community engagement, and more than 20,000 children have received EORE through school-based activities. In order to identify critical needs for the program baseline and end-line, Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice surveys were conducted during the program's life cycle. Different types of traditional and digital IEC materials were produced and distributed accordingly. Six wide billboards with messages on safe behavior were placed on highways along with 75 others across the conflict affected villages.

Additionally, UNICEF has been supporting "The Mine and Unexploded Ordnance Awareness Month" project along with other partners since October 2022. The project was a joint initiative by Football Development Foundation (FDF) and Turan Tovuz professional football club together with UNICEF, ANAMA and ICRC, organized with the financial support of the ECHO. The goal of the project was to provide Explosive Ordnance Risk Education to at risk populations, especially children living in the conflict affected territories, while reducing the impact of landmines using the popularity of football in the country. The project kicked off at the Azerbaijan Premier Football League match between Turan-Tovuz and Karabagh football clubs on 9 November 2022. The project will continue similarly in other conflict affected districts in 2023 and UNICEF will provide necessary support to deliver EORE to at risk population in order to save lives and limbs.

Every child has an equitable chance in life

In 2022, UNICEF committed to supporting the Government of Azerbaijan to meet its goals related to the implementation of Shock Responsive Social Protection (SRSP) as part of the National Socio-Economic Strategy Implementation Plan (2022 – 2026). As a first step, UNICEF conducted a quick assessment of the system and made recommendations on further steps. Key recommendations include: making decisions on the design of the targeting system, holding a facilitated workshop with key stakeholders in Social Policy and emergency response to develop a typology of shocks, carrying out a feasibility study for a 'virtual social registry' while scoping interest from other Ministries, particularly Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Ecology, for developing an Early Warning System for droughts, floods, severe weather, etc. and linking it with Social Policy interventions.

UNICEF Azerbaijan also introduced its first publicly available Budget Brief, which aims at opening discussions on how the government can improve children's investments by synthesizing complex budget information from a children's rights perspective.

Gender

In 2022, the Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis analyzed the percentage of deprived children given their characteristics like the gender of the child, region, gender of the household head, education level of parents, household size, etc. The results and gender disaggregated data will be used to inform policy makers and UNICEF programmes about the current situation and will contribute to the

formulation of gender-responsive social protection programmes in upcoming years.

Considering the gender related disparities among boys and girls, along with their access and participation in social and economic life of the country, UNICEF Azerbaijan supported the development of girl's skills and talents via skills and empowerment activities on Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM), Information Communication Technology and 21st century skills in partnership with the Youth Foundation and Ministry of Education and Science for both formal and informal levels.

The home visiting services had a gender-transformative impact through the engagement of fathers in childcare and Early Childhood Development. The intervention has a gender-responsive nature as it provides healthcare and counselling services for pregnant women and young mothers specific to their needs. The model also supports gender action through the capacity building of patronage nurses that are exclusively females, empowering them to support their families, while strengthening their role and influence in their communities.

Adolescents and Youth

UNICEF Azerbaijan assisted the Ministry of Youth & Sports in developing new State Youth Programme for 2023-2027. UNICEF helped in the development of result-based outputs with S.M.A.R.T. indicators for measuring progress during the implementation of the State Programme. The Basic Life Skills (BLS) Education programme developed by UNICEF was expanded to 15 Youth Development and Career Centers and 23 Youth Houses, as an informal learning opportunity. In 2022, 44 trainers from those institutions developed their BLS training skills in 5-day Training of Trainers and started the programme for young people across multiple regions, reaching 869 adolescents and young people including 500 girls and 369 boys.

Across 10 regions, 100 girls gained basic Digital Literacy Skills as a result of the project launched by UNICEF in partnership with the Youth Foundation in 2022.

UNICEF Azerbaijan, in partnership with the Abilitympics Federation, supported skills development of 50 young people including 24 girls and 26 boys with disabilities for professions including hairdressing, tailoring, cooking and information technologies. Four participants have already started jobs aligned with their specialties. A database of young people with disabilities was developed for employers to use, and the next steps towards the programme's sustainability include advocacy and financial support from the private sector.

One hundred selected students and recent graduates joined the Interns Academy project to gain soft skills such as communication, time management, stress management and practical experience on key trends in the field.

With the support of UNICEF Azerbaijan, 184 Youth Advisory Council members from 8 districts jointly initiated with local Executive Committees, small projects on climate change and explosive ordnance risk education with peers, engaging more than 1,800 adolescents and young people.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

In 2022 advocacy efforts were forged by expanding existing and building new partnerships, thanks to the leadership of the Representative, Deputy Representative, and Programme Specialists.

Alliances with existing partnerships with the European Union, European Union Humanitarian Aid, UK Embassy and governmental entities contributed to raising awareness on children issues in the public domain, including but not limited to child rights, nutrition, early childhood education, and social protection. Partnership with the Heydar Aliyev Foundation focused on Early Childhood Development and promoting child rights around World Children's Day. Explosive Ordnance Risk Education messaging has been promoted through partnership with the National Mine Actions Agency and the Football Development Foundation.

The partnership with the State Statistical Committee around Multiple Cluster Indicator Survey will help to provide crucial data for evidence-based advocacy in the remaining years of the CP and beyond. Working with the Ministry of Youth, Youth Foundation and civil society contributed to national efforts around youth empowerment. Social protection issues were advocated through multi-stakeholder partnerships with a range of partners.

Primary healthcare and quality of essential maternal and child health and nutrition services, child environmental health issues and ECD remained high on the agenda with both Government partners – such as Ministry of Health, SAMHI, TABIB and WHO.

The office deepened its start partnerships with other UN agencies including on environmental action and health (FAO, UNEP, and WHO), the and the UN Joint 16-days of activism campaign on Gender-Based Violence; planning and coordination of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) including its Joint Work Plan 2022.

The Country Office strengthened its relationship with the Ministry of Ecology on the area of climate change and water resource management. A Water, Sanitation & Hygiene expert from the UNICEF Jordan office provided technical assistance to the Ministry on the development of national water strategy, water quality issues, and climate change. Special attention was given to the development of the climate resilient water safety plans based on WHO guidelines. The purpose of the assignment was to identify improvement projects to enhance the water systems in target communities and strengthen their resilience to climate change impacts. All preparatory work was done in 2022 and the official kick of this assignment will happen in 2023.

Partnerships with the National Ability Foundation on employment opportunities for young people with disabilities and the Association of Football Federations of Azerbaijan on girl participation were continued this year; new partnership was formed with the Football Development Foundation on EORE among affected communities.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

The country office promoted a culture of field presence and closer engagement between UNICEF staff and beneficiaries, beyond just programme specialists. Programme assistants and operations staff actively participated in field visits, contributing to improving our programme, while acquiring a sense of ownership for the work colleagues contributed to directly and indirectly.

The limited human resources in the Country Office with only one fixed term appointment staff under each programme sector created significant challenges for cross-cutting issues, including sufficient staff time to serve as focal points of cross-cutting topics such as gender and climate change. However, the Country Office continued to encourage programme specialists to lead and coordinate the projects cut

across the sectors. Some good examples include the Early Childhood Development programme where engagement with social media influencers was tested to promote messages about breastfeeding, positive parenting, and fathers' engagement, and the EORE programme, where the power of football was used to strengthen the engagement of young girls and boys on messages around the dangers of explosives and mines.

The country office finalized its climate change strategy, engaging each sector, and already started incorporating climate change elements into its programme. In addition to the primary healthcare waste assessment, UNICEF Azerbaijan's partnership with the Azerbaijan State Museum of Art resulted in another innovative approach to raising awareness amongst the population, including children, on Climate Change. The "Hippo Planet" exhibition on climate change marked the start of UNICEF Azerbaijan's work on Climate Change. It was designed specifically for children and young generations, and included a timetable of activities and workshops for school children to learn more about Climate Change through UNICEF's mascot Simon the Hippo. Information sessions with young activists, policy makers and journalists also complemented the program for adults.

Within the health programme, ongoing healthcare reforms caused the fragmentation of service delivery, uncertainty of roles and responsibilities among government stakeholders and miscoordination of complex programmes, such as immunization of children. This was one of underlying reasons of the recent backsliding in vaccination coverage. However, UNICEF initiated a national immunization workshop to bring all responsible agencies to one platform and analyse the programme as a whole, to identify coordination gaps and solutions. This bold approach resulted in all stakeholders committing to having regular meetings along with a clear division of roles and accountabilities endorsed by top government levels, for a smooth coordination between MoH, SAMHI and TABIB, and ultimately quality service delivery.

Another key lesson learned was that the country needs strong cross-sectoral partnerships among government agencies for reforms on Child Protection and child rights. Duplication and overlapping functions, as well as the lack of a national-level supervision and monitoring system for local child protection agencies, created serious gaps and violations in the fulfilment of child rights. Besides this, decision-makers in line ministries need to have a strong technical capacity in child rights issues aligned with international standards. Government policies and practices in child protection should be focused on prevention, family and community-based alternative care, and non-custodial measures, instead of continuing an ad-hoc response, institutionalization, and detention measures which definitely are not in line with children's best interests.

In 2022, the unique role of UNICEF's persistent programme-led advocacy, technical support and partnership relations with government agencies ended up promoting the Guidelines on child-friendly communication and procedures in judicial instances. Since the Guidelines are not legally binding, the Ministry of Justice was reluctant to share it with the courts. However following the persistent actions of UNICEF Azerbaijan, an alternative solution was found, and finally, the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan recommended the Guidelines to all courts.

One of the major highlights in 2022 was the collaboration with the State Statistical Committee and the engagement of the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic for the first time. By establishing direct and clear communication with the Statistical Committee, and heavily investing in ensuring an honest and healthy relationship, we have once more confirmed that direct communication helps in avoiding miscommunication and supports effective and productive partnerships. It also builds trust, a core value that is needed throughout the MICS process and beyond.

On the effectiveness of the programme, no resources were invested in evaluations in 2022 due to the lack of advanced planning of resources and joint ownership with government over evaluation related activities. Moving forward, and already started in 2022, UNICEF Azerbaijan is including budget for evaluations in almost all proposals and at an early stage engage with government counterparts about

the importance of evaluations in the context of to assess the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of UNICEF interventions.

Maintaining a solid and happy team, through the true partnership between staff association, senior management, operations & programme, and by promoting a culture of living by UNICEF's Core Values of Care, Respect, Integrity, Trust, Accountability and Sustainability, is the one of the most important ingredients to getting work done from the heart for children. It is equally important to maintain the political space required for UNICEF to deliver its mandate. Resource abundance is secondary.