

Eritrea

Update on the context and situation of children

This report summarizes progress achieved during the first year of implementation of the Government of Eritrea (GoSE)-UNICEF country programme of cooperation 2022–2026, which is fully aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2022–2026. The UNSDCF sets out UN contributions to GoSE efforts to achieve the African Union’s Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a global commitment to the principle of ‘leaving no one behind’.

The total population of Eritrea was estimated to be about 3.6 million in 2019, comprising nine ethnolinguistic groups. Almost 40 percent of Eritreans are under the age of 15 years, indicating a young overall population and presenting significant potential for a future demographic dividend.

In July 2022 the GoSE presented its first voluntary national review (VNR) report to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, including a detailed review of two SDGs (#3: health and well-being and #13: climate action). This maiden report, the first such government review document in over a decade (since the 2010 Eritrea Human Population Health Survey), provides a crucial baseline for future national reporting.

Under the VNR’s chapter on ‘health and well-being’ (SDG #3), the Government stated its strong conviction that Eritrea would achieve the Agenda 2030 goal, particularly for under-5 mortality. The country continues to witness a decline in the under-5 mortality rate: from 46.5 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2015 to 39.3 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2020. But neonatal mortality, a major contributor to under-5 mortality, remained high at 17.7 deaths per 1,000 live births as of 2020.

Driven by a decline in the number of pregnant women testing positive for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)—now below 0.2 per cent—Eritrea began the process of validation, and ultimately certification, of elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV by 2023, a key milestone for SDG#3.

Eritrea continued its efforts to reduce, and ultimately eliminate, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), although progress remains negligible in two provinces. The ministries of Health and Labour and Social Welfare, together with the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), jointly agreed to undertake a mid-term evaluation of the national FGM/C strategic plan in 2023, with the objective of developing a transformative strategic plan of action for 2023–2024.

In relation to SDG #13 (climate action), the VNR reflected Eritrea’s strong commitment to, and the growing urgency of, addressing climate change to avert its potentially devastating impacts that disproportionately affect and harm the poorest and most vulnerable, especially women and children. The chapter on climate change was prepared in early 2022, when the Horn of Africa faced a third consecutive season of below-average rainfall that threatened severe water scarcity, food and nutrition insecurity and heightened the risk for disease and malnutrition. For Eritrea, the potential crisis was averted, thanks to a good rainy season (July to September), and with adequate preparation by farmers the country recorded a notable increase in its wheat harvest. The GoSE calls for considerable investment and resources to be directed towards projects and initiatives involving climate change adaptation, mitigation and related issues—including the construction of water infrastructure; soil and water conservation; promotion of clean, renewable energy; energy efficiency; and embedding climate change in the national education system.

Eritrea fell short of its 2018 commitment to attaining open defecation-free (ODF) status by December 2022 by just 11 per cent. By end-2022, the percentage of the population living in ODF-declared communities had risen to 89 per cent (from 73 per cent in 2021). The poorest performance was in urban and peri-urban areas, where 15 per cent of the population still practices open defecation.

Expected preliminary data from Eritrea's education management information system was not available at the time of reporting. When available, it should provide a much-needed assessment of gross enrolment for pre-primary education, which had risen from 18.8 per cent (18.7 per cent female) during the 2019/2020 schoolyear to 21.0 per cent (20.9 per cent female) in 2020/2021. Thus, access to early learning opportunities remains a major challenge to Eritrea's achievement of SDG 4.2.

Eritrea maintained the lowest COVID-19 death and infection rates in Africa, as well as a high recovery rate and minimal community transmission, despite the Government's decision not to rely on vaccinations. As of 27 December 2022, the total number of confirmed cases was 10,189, with a total of 10,086 recoveries and 103 deaths. The Government attributes its success to sustained high levels of public solidarity and previous experience in controlling endemic and communicable diseases.

Following the 2 November agreement by the Ethiopian Government and Tigray People's Liberation Front to permanently cease hostilities over Tigray, the GoSE initiated and signed a cooperation agreement with the newly appointed Kenyan president, committing to joint efforts to safeguard regional peace, stability, security and development in the Horn of Africa. These two commitments, which were followed by the commencement of Eritrea's demobilization of its military forces, sparked new hope for fulfilling Eritrea's socio-economic development goals.

Major contributions and drivers of results

During 2022 UNICEF Eritrea's programmatic and management priorities focused on: (a) sustaining live-saving health, immunization, nutrition, water and sanitation services; (b) expanding access to education and improving learning outcomes; (c) strengthening community engagement and social accountability to address harmful practices; (d) developing a social protection framework for society's most vulnerable members; and (e) enterprise risk management to ensure an enabling environment for effective programme delivery.

Health and immunization: Sixty-five per cent of the estimated 146,000 pregnant women attended at least four antenatal care (ANC) visits in 2022, exceeding the GoSE-UNICEF set target of 60 per cent. However, 57 per cent of the targeted 53,000 infants were delivered by a skilled birth attendant, below the 2022 target of 62 per cent. Contributing factors to the missed target for delivery by skilled birth attendance were late initiation of ANC and poor adherence to the ANC schedule, mainly due to transport and geographic barriers.

Between January and September, 110,325 children aged 0-to-59 months with suspected pneumonia were given appropriate antibiotics in UNICEF-supported areas.

During 2022 the expanded programme of immunization sustained relatively high immunization coverage: 81 per cent of children under one year of age received three doses of diphtheria/tetanus/pertussis (DTP3)-containing vaccine (target: 85 per cent) and in 65 per cent of all districts, at least 80 per cent of children received DTP/Penta 3-containing vaccine.

Introduction of a new vaccine to combat human papillomavirus (a high-impact intervention to prevent cervical cancer) resulted in the vaccination of 96.6 per cent of the targeted 300,000 girls aged 8-to-14 years. This impressive coverage demonstrated Eritrea's well-developed, data-driven national vaccination system, inter-ministerial collaboration and the country's pledge to 'leave no one behind'.

UNICEF fully contributed to the procurement of both traditional and new vaccines as well as related vaccine supplies and logistics, to ensure uninterrupted quality immunization service delivery. UNICEF contributed 80 per cent of the cost of traditional vaccines (Bacille Calmette Guerin (BCG), bivalent oral Polio vaccine (bOPV), Tetanus and Diphtheria (Td)); the GoSE contributed the remaining 20 per cent.

UNICEF procured and installed 195 solar direct drive (SDD) cold chain equipment (CCE) for new health facilities and to replace obsolete equipment, ensuring adequate storage capacity for vaccines and vaccine potency in all 301 health facilities providing immunization services. UNICEF provided leadership by regularly convening meetings of key immunization partners (Ministry of Health, MoH; Global Vaccine Alliance, GAVI; World Health Organization, WHO) to ensure strengthened collaboration and alignment, as well as by supporting the completion of the country's application to GAVI for immunization funding.

Nutrition: A total of 23,630 (target: 21,000) children with severe acute malnutrition (SAM) and 30,953 (target: 34,000) children with moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) were admitted and treated with quality nutrition services across the country's 328 facility- and community-based therapeutic feeding sites. About 81 per cent of the 54,583 admitted acutely malnourished children (SAM and MAM) were in climate change-sensitive areas and had experienced food and nutrition insecurity. Preliminary reports showed that 92 per cent of feeding sites achieved a cure rate above 90 per cent—exceeding the international SPHERE standard of 75 per cent.

Malnourished children were identified during routine screening of children under the age of five, using UNICEF's mid-upper arm circumference measurement protocol for both SAM and MAM and one treatment product, a ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF). In addition, to prevent deterioration of nutritional status due to the predicted drought, blanket supplementary foods were provided to more than 16,686 children aged 6–59 months and pregnant and lactating women in high-risk and other affected areas.

A total of 248,364 children 6–59 months of age received Vitamin A supplementation (VAS) (target: 360,000) and 113,916 adolescent girls and pregnant women received iron-folic acid (target: 160,000). The notable gap in coverage resulted from a Vitamin A stock-out caused by shipping delays.

During 2022, in line with a long-standing arrangement with the Government, UNICEF procured and provided the country's nutrition supply requirement of lifesaving RUTF, supplementary food, F-100, F-75, Resomal and micronutrient supplements (iron folic acid, Vitamin A capsules), and potassium iodate (iodine) assuring uninterrupted delivery of quality therapeutic and preventive nutrition services.

Sanitation and water supply: By year-end, 89 per cent (2,008,613) of Eritrea's population had attained ODF status, up from 73 per cent in 2021. During 2022 an additional 344 villages were declared ODF, enabling an additional 220,190 people (target: 506,600; 99,086 male, 121,104 female, including 11,830 people with disabilities) to access safe and appropriate sanitation facilities. To date, 2,540 (89 per cent) of the country's 2,839 villages have been declared ODF.

In collaboration with UNICEF the MoH initiated an ongoing ODF assessment in selected rural and urban areas to establish strategic enablers to ensure that the remaining 300 villages (58 in urban/semi-urban settings, with an estimated population of 224,049) attain access to appropriate sanitation and contribute to reaching the national ODF goal.

The Ministry of Land, Water and Environment (MoLWE) undertook community-led upgrading and construction of new climate-resilient, solar-powered water supply systems across 37 highly populated communities (including 30 drought-affected communities), enabling an additional 125,874 (target:

30,720) people (69 per cent females) to gain access to a safe and sustainable water supply. More than 80 per cent of the water supply equipment and rehabilitation supplies need were procured offshore, a process executed by the GoSE within four months after receiving the UNICEF funding.

By end-2022, Eritrea's water supply management information showed that 490 community water points were solar-powered, 65 per cent of which were established since 2017 through direct UNICEF funding and support. Taking note of the unfolding global climate crisis and its impact on children and women, the GoSE discontinued the use of handpumps and prioritized solar-driven, climate-smart investments. This decision provides a platform for collaborative engagement with UNICEF on climate change and sustainable development.

Education: In October 2022 the first direct cash transfer request from the Ministry of Education (MoE)—under a Global Partnership for Education (GPE) grant approved in early 2020—was received and processed by UNICEF (as Grant Agent) and released to the government. The cash transfer, totalling US\$4.0 million, prioritized increased/improved access to learning centres and enhanced quality of teaching and learning for primary school grade levels.

Within a three-month period, the MoE had established 11 complementary elementary education (CEE) centres in Gash Barka, with essential teaching and learning materials, enabling just over 2,200 (target:10,000) overaged, out-of-school children (1,660 girls) from 25 villages with high educational needs to resume their education. The MoE also provided cash incentives to 1,000 middle-school-age girls, living in and selected by nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, and ensured their retention and transition to secondary education.

A total of 118 primary (47 girls) and 40 lower-secondary (25 girls) students were enrolled at the Keren School of the Deaf, located in Zoba Anseba, following its expansion to include lower-secondary classes. It is the only school for deaf children in the country with a boarding facility, allowing deaf children from underserved areas to access education. The MoE and Ministry of Labour and Human Welfare revitalized the 'Donkey to school' project, which supports children with mobility disabilities to access schools; some 100 children (20 girls) received support in 2022. In addition, 243 children with disabilities were supported to access education—double the annual target.

Expected preliminary data from Eritrea's education management information system was not available at the time of reporting. When available, it should provide a much-needed assessment of gross enrolment for pre-primary education, which had risen from 18.8 per cent (18.7 per cent female) during the 2018/2019 schoolyear to 21.0 per cent (20.9 per cent female) in 2019/2021. Thus, access to early learning opportunities remains a major challenge to Eritrea's achievement of SDG 4.2.

Poor learning outcomes remain a challenge in Eritrea. The combined results of the minimum mastery level for literacy and numeracy at Grades 3 and 5 stood at 46.1 per cent and 37.6 per cent, respectively (MLA-IV 2018), and the Grade 8 pass rate saw a decline from 59.8 per cent (before COVID-19 school closures) to 50.4 per cent.

In 2022 the MoE took several steps to improve the quality of education, including preparing to scale up implementation of national standards for quality education from 96 schools to an additional 350 schools. A total of 330 teachers participated in regional workshops on the global learning crisis, education recovery and how to address the learning gap in Eritrean schools reflected by the 2018 MLA-IV survey and decline in the Grade 8 pass rate.

Following Eritrea's participation in two global education forums, particularly the '5-Million Future' for pre-primary education and the 'Transforming Education' summit, the GoSE identified four critical areas to address to close the learning gap, namely: expansion of early childhood education classes; foundational literacy and numeracy; teaching at the right level and accelerated construction of school

classrooms in geographical areas in dire need of learning space.

Child protection: Through a joint partnership between the MoH, MoE, NUEW, UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF, the Government continued to enlist community support to end two outlawed harmful practices that place girl children at risk —female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and underage marriage. During 2022 a total of 298,539 (target:100,000) people participated in community engagement campaigns and interventions to promote positive gender-related norms.

A total of 20,920 (target: 20,000) community elders were engaged in a public declaration in support of FGM/C abandonment across the country's 142 high-burden villages (28 per cent of target). An estimated 45,000 young and adolescent girls enjoyed living in these 142 villages where the community's proclaimed zero tolerance for FGM was sustained.

Despite limited funding, UNICEF sustained its partnership with NUEW, a civil society organization mandated to lead the national gender agenda. In late 2022, some 192 women front-line workers of the NUEW participated in a week-long induction training on NUEW's commitment to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and to creating environments where populations are safe, respected and can access the protection and assistance they need without fear of sexual exploitation and abuse. The NUEW has expressed interest in advancing PSEA programming in 2023, using its grassroots networks.

Social policy and social protection: The country now has 4,748 trained community-based social service workers (37 per cent female), capable of providing appropriate social services, either as social workers, rehabilitation workers or community mobilizers. The training, co-financed by UNICEF, contributed to ensuring effective utilization of direct cash transfers. As a result, coverage of community-based social protection services and programme efficacy is expected to improve. The training of additional social workers also led to an increase in the number of vulnerable children covered by cash transfers, from 150,000 in 2021 to 162,160 in 2022.

In 2022, UNICEF contributed to the development and finalization of a national policy for social protection and a social protection strategic plan (2023–2027), by providing strategic guidance and policy recommendations to the Government.

Financial management

By end-December 2022, the country office's overall funding amounted to US\$19.6M (US\$3.1M in RR, US\$11.0M in ORR, and US\$5.5M in ORE). Overall funding for 2022 was higher than that of the past two years (US\$11.8 million in 2021 and US\$13.2 million in 2020).

During the year, US\$9.9 million of the overall funding was dispensed through direct cash transfers (DCTs) and provision of supplies, 77 per cent and 23 per cent, respectively) to different line ministries.

Liquidation of long outstanding DCTs to the Government remained a major risk to programme implementation. By end-December, overall outstanding DCT amounted to US\$9.9 million, of which US\$4.3 million was outstanding more than six months.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

During 2022 UNICEF worked closely with UN sister agencies through UN Results Groups, Business Operating Support Services, Government Sector and the UNCT/ Humanitarian Country Team as well as with individual agencies.

UNICEF received US\$2.0 million for drought response from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) for the nutrition and WASH programmes, via the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Enhanced collaboration between UNICEF and WHO led to quality technical support extended to the MoH for its successful application of the cold chain equipment optimization platform (with a ceiling of US\$0.62m); health systems strengthening grant (US\$ 6.2m), equity accelerator funding (US\$1.0m), and re-submission to GAVI on the measles, rubella follow-up campaign (US\$ 0.3m). In addition, both agencies also supported the MoH to implement the GoSE's strategy for improving maternal, new-born, child and adolescent health.

With technical leadership by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and active involvement by UNICEF, the GoSE presented its inaugural VNR report to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, including a detailed review of SDGs #3 (health and well-being) and #13 (climate action). Efforts to gather data for the VNR highlighted the gap in data needed to assess progress toward child-related SDGs.

The MoH also made extensive use of the technical expertise available from UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA and UNAIDS to address key bottlenecks.

UNICEF's partnership with UNFPA, through the Global Joint Programme to end FGM, helped Eritrea to advance toward its goal of ensuring that no more than 10 per cent of girls under 15 years of age undergo FGM by end-2026.

UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP supported participation by government officials in the global experts' group meeting at the 6th Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems. As a result, the Government made a commitment to establish a functional, universal, compulsory and complete CRVS system in Eritrea starting in 2023.

UNICEF established a credible collaborative partnership with the Ministry of Finance and National Development (MoFND) to facilitate accelerated implementation of long-stalled education activities and advocacy for intensified field monitoring.

UNICEF continued to strengthen relationships with key donor partners, receiving invaluable support from the Governments of Ireland, the United Kingdom and Japan, as well as from GAVI, CERF, the GPE and the Fred Hollows Foundation. During the year, UNICEF facilitated two in-country visits (UK development office and GPE team), which provided valuable opportunities for sharing perspectives.

During the last quarter, a high-level meeting on development partner engagement was convened by UNICEF to update partners on progress on the SDGs for children and advocate on issues of remote learning, neonatal mortality and open defecation. The meeting also served as a reminder to the government and stakeholders of the commitment to children in Eritrea implicit in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Following the visit by GPE headquarters representatives, monthly tripartite meetings with relevant ministries, including the MoFND, were initiated to stress the need for funds utilization and resolve outstanding DCT issues. This led to facilitating a joint UNICEF/MoE field mission to assess progress towards completion of the Kekebet boarding school located in Gash Barka.

During the year, UNICEF efforts to mobilize development resources for Eritrea through development partners (British and Irish aid agencies, governments of Italy and Japan) met growing challenges, as they preferred to fund UNICEF through the humanitarian window to promote climate resilience. This highlighted the need for periodic brief updates—over and above scheduled donor reports—on progress and challenges in programme implementation. The two country visits facilitated by UNICEF successfully led to greater clarity and appreciation of the programming context. As next steps, development of the GPE ‘compact’ and an enabling environment analysis will be crucial to shaping concerted efforts to drive transformation in the education sector.

Through UNICEF Australia, the office was able to demonstrate the strong links between climate-resilient water supply and the elimination of trachoma, which enabled extension of the funding agreement with the Fred Hollows Foundation for another three years.

The Water Resource Department of the MoLWE provided firm leadership in expediting the humanitarian response for affected communities and delivered timely results. The partnership between UNICEF and Eritrea’s national procurement entity (Red Sea Corporation) facilitated both in-country and offshore procurement of water supply and solar equipment that were made available within four months.

The GoSE-led VNR process exposed the challenge of data unavailability for tracking children’s progress in various core development areas. The VNR report acknowledged the urgency of strengthening the national statistical system and building capacity for domestic data generation, processing, analysis and dissemination by enhancing collaboration and coordination among data producers in the country. The VNR recommended the establishment of a strong and efficient national statistical system and reliable, high-quality data as critical elements to guide and support evidence-based planning and advance the 2030 Agenda. UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP plan to take advantage of this opportunity, prioritizing in the joint workplan with the MoFND the examination of joint programming to support government attempts to fill the gaps in data for 23 of 44 child-related SDG indicators.