

## Gulf Area

### Update on the context and situation of children

**Overview:** The UNICEF Gulf Area Office (GAO) represents UNICEF in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain and is focused on advancing child protection, early childhood development, social policy, data and evidence for children while strengthening partnerships and alliances with Gulf based actors in support of children around the world, especially the most vulnerable and those affected by humanitarian crisis. Over the years, the Gulf countries have successfully translated national resource wealth into a rapid increase in the standard of living for their citizens.

**Economy:** Throughout its history, the Gulf sub-region has experienced distinct periods of rising oil revenues. During those periods, countries deepened their dependency on oil and gas, increased wages and hirings in the public sector, expanded social safety nets, and ramped up capital expenditure. According to the IMF Policy Paper[1], GDP growth for Gulf countries—Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—is expected to more than double, reaching 6.5 percent in 2022, primarily driven by stronger hydrocarbon and non-hydrocarbon industries.

**Political stability:** The relative **political** stability and private and public wealth in the Gulf sub-region is in sharp contrast to the deteriorating socio-economic situation in much of the Middle East, characterized by deteriorating child rights, several entrenched armed conflicts, high unemployment, a massive population of refugees and forcibly displaced persons, marginalized youth, and growing poverty. In recent years, the Gulf states have emerged as key humanitarian donors in the region. Their funding has been critical for UNICEF and other UN agencies, allowing them to respond to the growing needs of the most vulnerable children. During 2022[2], a new generation of leaders in the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and the UAE's president, Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, came to power more determined to pursue an independent foreign policy course that they considered more reflective of their nation's leadership in regional and global affairs. The one-day Jeddah Security and Development Summit[3], hosted by Saudi Arabia, brought leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, together with US President. The leaders affirmed their common vision for a region where peace and prosperity prevail.

**Social and demographic context:** The combined population of the sub-region is approximately 54.1 million. The Gulf sub-region is highly urbanized. Kuwait has the highest urban population at 100%, followed by Qatar at 99.3%, Bahrain at 89.7%, UAE at 87.5%, and KSA at 84.7%.[4] Rapid population growth and urbanization are pressing issues, resulting in environmental damage and pollution and a high demand for scarce land, water, and food.

Across board, the Gulf states have made considerable progress against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Notable progress has been made on several key areas for children, including quality education (SDG 4), water and sanitation (SDG 6), and good health and wellbeing (SDG 3). However, there is a lack of data regarding poverty (SDG 1) and reduced inequality (SDG 10) in several countries [5].

All five countries have put in place national development plans contributing to the realization of the 2030 SDG agenda. These plans have identified comprehensive strategies for realizing child rights and have made positive advances in these sectors for example, a focus on improved primary health care, strengthening education systems and skill development for youth, mental health for adolescents. Several national development plans state that they aim to enable young citizens to contribute to, shape and lead a knowledge-based economy more effectively[6]; however, the health and wellbeing of

adolescents and youth is a growing concern. Trends show an increase in obesity, diabetes, substance abuse and mental health challenges across the sub-region.

In recent years, states in the Gulf have improved gender parity through legislative reform. For example, in 2019-2020, KSA eased guardianship laws, allowing women and girls to travel without male permission, in addition to reforming laws related to travel documents, personal status, labour and social insurance. Bahrain has made steady progress in gender parity in education, women's empowerment and the health sector. In 2020, the Kuwait National Assembly passed Law 16/2020, addressing domestic violence. However, cultural acceptance and propagation of gender discrimination remains prevalent across the sub-region, coupled with continuing discriminatory provisions in law.[4] As it relates to social protection, the Gulf states have been spending a substantive portion of their GDP on providing basic services, high subsidies and public sector employment to their population (predominately citizens). In some countries, such as KSA, the state offers an income guarantee programme for low-income households and people with disabilities as well as the Citizen Account Programme supporting 10 million Saudi participants. In Kuwait, an off-budget extra-budgetary fund was created by the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Zakat Fund and a group of more than 50 NGOs. It financed the distribution of in-kind and cash assistance, as well as hot meals and hygiene kits.

Despite progress across the Gulf countries, national legislation is not fully in line with international standards. The Committee on the Rights of the Child identified gaps in child rights legislation, including issues relating to the right to acquire nationality, gender-based violence and discrimination, the legal age of criminal and the definition of a child, especially regarding child marriage and juvenile justice, among others.[7]

[1] IMF Policy Paper No. 2022/052, November 29, 2022

[2] Middle East Institute, "2022 trends and drivers to watch in the Middle East", January 18, 2022

[3] Arab News, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2123541/saudi-arabia>

[4] Demography Data: UNPD, World Population Prospects 2022 and UNHCR Data Portal 2022, as cited in UNICEF MENARO, Factsheet on the Situation of Children, Data Brief: September 2022

[5] CCA, Insights and Opportunities for Strategic Cooperation between the Government of the Kingdom of Bahrain and the UN (internal), 7 May 2020

[6] CCA Country Reports (KSA, Kuwait and Bahrain) 2020, 2021

[7] Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on the Combined Fourth to Sixth Periodic Reports of Bahrain, 27 February 2019, CRC/C/BHR/CO/4-6; Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on the Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of Saudi Arabia, 25 October 2016 (CRC/C/SAU/CO/3-4 para 6-8)

## Major contributions and drivers of results

This section provides key contributions of the UNICEF GAO to advancing the situation of children and adolescents in KSA, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain across four outcome areas:

### 1. Early Childhood Development

In 2022, UNICEF GAO continued to make solid progress on Early childhood Development (ECD) including influencing policies and standards, building institutional capacity and enhancing knowledge and practices of caretakers and parents to support their children.

UNICEF's advocacy work brought ECD related issues – including breastfeeding, healthy nutrition, positive parenting, early childhood education, early screening and stimulation – to the forefront of national debates, giving prominence to ECD as key to human development. Across the five Gulf

countries, and through UNICEF's advocacy and engagement in the consultations leading to the Transforming Education Summit, ECD was included as a key priority in all of the National Declarations of the countries. In Kuwait, and with UNICEF's advocacy and technical advice, the Government launched a new initiative "New Kuwait for Children: the First 1,000 Days", as part of the Kuwait's VISION 2035, which provides a road map to advance ECD nationally across health, education and protection.

While policy and advocacy work leveraged political commitment to ECD, UNICEF's efforts to advance the institutional capacity of the ministries providing services continued. In KSA, the Ministry of Education, with technical advice from UNICEF, started the national roll out of an advanced training package on children's safety and protection in nurseries and preschool through delivering a training of trainers for a national core team. The core team will cascade the training in all 47 education districts in 2023. In UAE, and in partnership with the Ministry of Health, the "first 1,000 days" training which was developed with technical support from UNICEF in 2021 was added to the Ministry's learning platform called Maharati. It is estimated that over 6,000 professionals across the health sector accessed the training modules. In the Sharjah Emirate of UAE, the "Child friendly Schools and Nurseries Initiative" was launched with draft standards prepared with technical support from UNICEF to guide schools and nurseries to promote children's well-being and to fulfil their rights. In Kuwait, UNICEF supported national efforts to promote breastfeeding by joining efforts with WHO in the rollout of the baby-friendly hospitals initiative as well as provided technical expertise to the opening of the first breast feeding counselling center. In Qatar, UNICEF joined forces with Qatar Foundation to address the capacity gaps on identification, assessment, and interventions for youngest children with disabilities.

UNICEF's support also focused on applying the science of social and behavioral change to promote positive parenting practices of younger children by providing technical advice to the design, implementation and monitoring of national campaigns. A number of country wide ECD campaigns were conducted in 2022, reaching close to 7 million people in KSA, UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait. These campaigns contributed to promoting positive parenting practices for younger children including early play, nurturing care, breastfeeding and support to youngest children with disabilities. Such campaigns were launched by the government in addition to the private sector (Zain company across KSA, UAE and Bahrain). Additionally, in UAE, an online platform promoting positive parenting during the first 1000 days of a child's life was developed.

As it relates to knowledge sharing and influence, UNICEF's experts continued to advocate and bring knowledge on child related issues. UNICEF participated in over a dozen in-person and hybrid workshops, conferences covering topics– from preschool education, parenting, early screening, child-friendly hospitals – reaching over 900 experts and decision makers and 3,000 caretakers.

## **2. Child Protection**

A coalescence of different initiatives on child protection gave the child protection reform agenda for the sub-region a huge boost. A number of significant policy reforms took place and contributed to a more enabling environment for child protection. In KSA, UNICEF provided technical advice to the development of key strategic policy documents including the first National Child Online Safety Framework, the National Policy for Anti-bullying and the National Schools Wellbeing Framework ensuring alignment with the CRC and global standards and benchmarks. The three documents are being reviewed for endorsement in 2023. In UAE, a new Draft Motherhood and Childhood strategy (2023-2027) was prepared with UNICEF's technical support. UNICEF is also participating in the Abu Dhabi Emirate Child Protection Working Group influencing emirate level policies and coordination mechanisms. In Kuwait, a draft road map for strengthening the child protection system was formulated by convening key partners for the first time on this topic. The road map was drafted by UNICEF's experts and is being reviewed to be implemented and budgeted for as part of the Vision 2035 of Kuwait. Qatar has initiated a national mapping of child protection systems and social service workforce.

Several institutional capacity building interventions were undertaken on social work and child

protection. In UAE, a rapid mapping of child protection services was undertaken together with a review and documentation of the child protection reforms in Abu Dhabi with UNICEF's leadership. Both documents provide evidence for national scale up plans. The evidence generation was also supported with the roll out of PRIMERO[1] in Abu Dhabi which contributes to stronger case management and data systems. Learnings from the PRIMERO piloting will inform scale up in UAE and across the Gulf Countries.

As it relates to migration and children on the move agenda, UNICEF played a key role in both advocacy and capacity building efforts. In KSA, capacity building initiatives were undertaken for border management personnel and other functionaries which contributed to enhancing their knowledge and practices in applying the CRC in border management and during armed conflicts. Following the training and the engagement of key officials in regional meetings on children on the move, plans are underway to organize further knowledge exchange briefings in Kuwait and KSA. In Qatar, jointly with the Government, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) UNHCR and IOM, UNICEF continues to identify durable solutions for the unaccompanied and separated Afghan children in Qatar evacuated from Afghanistan as a result of U.S. led evacuation.

Given the focus on mental health, UNICEF provided technical advice to the Ministry of Education in UAE in the development of assessment tools and resources on mental health which will benefit nearly hundreds of thousands of children, upon its finalization. Additionally, online resources on adolescent mental health were developed and used in national level campaigns reaching an estimated 2.1 million people. In Qatar, the Teacher Preparedness and Training Package (TPTP) was adapted and updated by the Ministry of Education, with UNICEF's support, with a focus on protection, psychosocial well-being. Furthermore, two studies were launched in KSA and Kuwait, with UNICEF's support, to assess mental health services in the primary care systems. Similarly in Qatar, a study was launched focusing on the psychosocial well-being of school children to inform effective responses and preliminary results of this were presented at the bi-annual World Innovation Summit on Health in Doha.

Moving away from mere awareness raising to a more strategic approach to behavioral change, some significant institutional building interventions were concluded with UNICEF's support. This included the finalization of the Social and Behavioural Change and Communication strategy (SBCC) on Child Protection in Abu Dhabi, and the development of a draft SBCC strategy to complement the National Child Online Safety Framework in the KSA. The guidance developed is expected to be used by partners in informing all their future work in behaviour change. Furthermore, and to support a systematic approach to social and behavioral change, an institutional capacity building training was delivered to UNICEF's lead governmental partner in KSA with the participation of key ministries on the science of social and behavioral change. Campaigns in the UAE, undertaken with government partners and private sector, on issues related to online safety and mental health reached over 5.1 million combined, with engagement of over 760,000 people.

UNICEF also participated in high level global conferences and events, organized by KSA, for positioning the child rights agenda. This included the Global Cybersecurity Forum and the MISK Forum. UNICEF appointed 3 youth advocates, including a non-national, in the UAE and worked with the national Children's advisory council to advance issues of child rights.

### **3. Social Policy and Data**

Sensitization of policy makers on the importance of public finance for children in the realization of children's rights was a key result for KSA. UNICEF hosted a three-day workshop with experts and policy makers in KSA to educate them and build their capacity on conducting a Child-focused Public Expenditure Measurement exercise. The Kingdom issued a royal decree to formalize its commitment to this line of work, and a project workplan was prepared to guide this work in 2023, pending approval from Ministry of Finance.

UNICEF generated evidence on the social protection responses of Bahrain, KSA, Kuwait and UAE to

the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate possible entry points for collaboration in 2023. The findings will underpin UNICEF's advocacy around increased child-sensitivity and shock-responsiveness of these systems, including at a planned sub-regional social protection forum in 2023 to articulate GCC social protection priorities in line with the 2022 regional ministerial decree.

Social workforce strengthening is an area that has been of increased interest for government partners. KSA is undergoing a reform of its social protection system, including the development of a licensing mechanism for social workers. In collaboration with the Social Service Workforce Alliance, UNICEF convened a workshop for the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development and partners to share knowledge on good practices and validate the existing process led by KSA. A workplan with the Ministry to provide ongoing support to this process and ensure it provides optimum services to families was prepared for 2023. Similarly, in Qatar a new Ministry of social Development and Family was established for the first time and UNICEF is working with the ministry to develop a multi-year workplan on social service workforce strengthening, social protection and family friendly policies. Family friendly policies is an agenda that UNICEF has been advocating for across the Gulf countries with a focus on children and women. As a result, political commitment was secured to launch research that maps existing legislation and family friendly policies and services in KSA, Kuwait and Qatar. Initial findings were presented at the Gulf Family Conference in 2022, the first-time family-friendly policies have featured as part of this annual, high-level gathering. The findings of this research will help UNICEF position the issue of family-friendly policies in the Gulf countries.

UNICEF continued to promote improved governance at local level as part of the child-friendly city initiative (CFCI). UNICEF supported Sharjah, in UAE, to prepare for a second CFCI cycle and recognition process as its first cycle draws to a close. With UNICEF's stewardship, Sharjah's Child-friendly Office is also contributing – both financially and programmatically - to pilot the new global monitoring tool under development in 2023. UNICEF also signed a memorandum of understanding with Al Ahsa city in KSA to launch its CFCI application in 2023, and drafted a plan for the same for Abu Dhabi, in UAE, at the request of local government.

As it relates to addressing data and evidence in the Gulf, UNICEF supported the development and publication of a comprehensive report on Data Availability and Gaps in KSA across the SDG child related indicators, a Data Policy Document on data governance and a Strategic Data Action plan. As a result of this analytical contribution, a Technical Committee will be convened in 2023 to coordinate the implementation of the strategic data action plan and advocate for child rights and related data requirements. The results of the study have reinforced ongoing discussions with KSA to define the budget and timeline for conducting MICS7 in 2024. Similarly in Qatar, UNICEF supported strengthening the capacity at the Planning and Statistics Authority to undertake MICS6 in 2023. UNICEF actively participated in several regional and global consultations and events organized by the Planning and Statistics Authority in Qatar on strengthening the production and use of administrative data and the role of the office of official statistics in countries in supporting the SDGs.

Several studies and evidence generation activities are underway by UNICEF experts to address knowledge gaps and contribute to policy dialogue. Research studies to document and assess the mental health and psychosocial support services in KSA, Kuwait and Qatar were launched. The study on Climate Landscape Analysis for Children in UAE and KSA will examine the baseline situation of climate change related issues affecting children and proffer recommendations to mitigate against impact of climate change. This was supported by a youth led mapping of organizations working in climate change and youth in KSA and UAE. The two youth advocates leading the mapping were also sponsored by UNICEF to participate in COP27. Furthermore, a formative evaluation on anti-bullying in schools in the UAE was launched and will generate knowledge to inform decision-making, advocacy and potentially scale up the programme. In addition, two situational analyses (Kuwait and UAE) were completed in 2022. The UAE SitAn and its associated advocacy and policy briefs on ECD, child protection and participation will inform policy, programmes, build partnerships and mobilize resources for children.

#### **4. Partnerships for Children**

GAO secured USD 121 million in funding against a total target of USD 174 million this year,

reflecting 70% of the target reached. Of this total, USD 83 million was raised from the private sector, meeting 105 % of the target, while USD 38 million was secured from public sector partners, representing 40% of the target. Targets were increased significantly this year, building on the success of 2021. The funding secured indicates the potential for further growth in both public and private channels in the coming years, despite an increasingly challenging fundraising environment globally.

2022 reflected a remarkable shift in income trends, with private sector funding exceeding public sector – by a significant margin – for the first time. The public sector target was not obtained due to a large in-kind contribution for logistics support being under-utilised by the organisation, but major agreements were secured yet again with KSrelief and the Government of the United Arab Emirates, with a strong pipeline leading into 2023. Strong engagement with the Government of Qatar ultimately led to the largest single contribution to Regular Resources from the Gulf this year, worth USD 8 million.

GAO focused its efforts on maximising existing long-term partnerships with foundations including Educate a Child and Education Above All, the Crown Prince Court, and Gamers Without Borders. The Educate a Child partnership is one that goes from strength to strength, benefitting from high quality programme delivery alongside dedicated relationship management capacity within UNICEF. Philanthropy has been identified as an area of significant potential within the Gulf, and this year UNICEF secured six-figure contributions from high-net-worth individuals through relationships nurtured in recent years. There was also strong growth in the individual giving market, which raised more than USD 900,000 this year to be channelled through Regular Resources

[1] PRIMERO is a UNICEF supported open source software platform that helps to manage protection related data with tools that facilitate case management and incident monitoring.

## UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF GAO witnessed strengthened partnerships with its strategic government partners like the Family Affairs Council in KSA, Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood and Abu Dhabi and Early Childhood Authority in UAE, Supreme Council for Family Affairs and Supreme Council for Planning and Development in Kuwait – opening a dialogue for more systemic and sustainable action related to national policies and plans. Through open dialogue, transparency and mutual interest to advance children’s rights, a relationship of trust and strategic alliance was strengthened.

Additionally, the private sector continued to play a critical role in advancing the child rights agenda in the Gulf and beyond. For example, Zain and Du telecommunication companies sponsored a number of national campaigns promoting messaging on children’s rights with a focus on early childhood development and child protection.

UNICEF GAO had similar substantial collaboration with UN systems and country teams across the sub-region with active engagement in the development of updated Common Country Assessments (CCA) in KSA and Bahrain. The Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (SDCFs) was signed in KSA as well as the revised Bahrain’s SDCF. UNICEF has assertively contributed to each country’s CCA and SDCF and assured that children’s rights and priorities are well reflected and addressed. Additionally, in Bahrain, the UN agencies prepared a number of joint proposals to submit to the One UN fund including one proposal on ECD and another on Child Protection.

Examples of successful collaboration with other UN organizations include UNICEF’s advocacy on rights of migrant children in collaboration with IOM and OHCHR where capacity building initiatives were undertaken for border management personnel and other functionaries enhancing their knowledge and practices in relation to applying the Convention on the Rights of the Child in humanitarian border management and during armed conflicts. Another example is the joint efforts by UNICEF and UNESCO in the preparations for the Transforming Education Summit and providing the needed technical expertise in designing and delivering the national consultations and the formulation of the National Declarations across the five Gulf Countries.

- High quality technical expertise and investment in strengthening strategic partnerships with lead Governmental partners is key to building trust with the Governments of the Gulf Countries and influencing issues that maybe considered sensitive such as child protection and data. Aligning UNICEF's areas of influence with Government's national priorities and visions is instrumental to advance these partnerships;

- Interactions between Gulf partners and UNICEF senior management remain critical to securing high-value, high-visibility strategic partnerships both at the domestic and global level. This was evident in the Global Government Summit 2022 in UAE, Global Cybersecurity Forum in KSA and during the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. A number of new opportunities will be offered in 2023 including the Third Riyadh International Humanitarian Forum in KSA and the COP28 in UAE;

- The scope to expand private sector partnerships across the Gulf is considerable, especially with members of the UN Global Compact. In order to develop such partnerships, GAO will need to revise its' strategy to ensure the optimal allocation of limited human resources required to manage the partnerships, focusing much more on high-value opportunities at both the domestic and global level. At the domestic level, public private partnerships in advancing children's rights agenda are expanding with many successful examples of collaboration in 2022 in the area of social and behavioral change campaigns in early childhood development and child protection;

- Providing high level technical expertise and offering knowledge exchange platforms for the Gulf Countries at regional and global level to show case good practices from their countries are two key strategies to advancing partnerships in the Gulf and positioning UNICEF's brand as a knowledge-broker, reliable and a partner of choice for GAO governments;

- UNICEF's flexibility to adjust plans and observe local ethics requirements for research was key even when proven challenging. Example for this are the studies in Qatar, which have faced severe delays due to unforeseen additional ethics requirements. In KSA, delays and quality concerns related to local data collection through qualitative methods, such as expert interviews and focus groups, have delayed some research projects.

- The SDGs and the inclusion of high-income countries in a common development agenda with all other countries has served as a key entry point to collaborate with the Gulf countries. There is now a willingness in the sub-region to engage around data, SDG reporting and global ranking that is unprecedented. For UNICEF GAO, this is a great opportunity to fully engage with national authorities (including National Statistical Offices, Ministries of Planning, Health, Education and other entities) to provide the technical support and guidance needed to help the Governments review existing data and all its parameters and align with international best practices in reporting on SDG indicators on a routine and sustainable basis.