

Pacific Islands

Update on the context and situation of children

The impact of COVID-19 on the health and well-being of children in the Pacific was felt acutely through 2022, with the 14 Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) experiencing community transmission in different ways and with differing timelines (several PICTs, including the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Palau and Solomon Islands were globally among the last countries to experience COVID-19 outbreaks). Lockdowns and restrictions were in effect through the first half of 2022 in most PICTs and the pandemic had a deep impact on the PICTs social, political, and economic landscape with loss of livelihoods, increased gender inequities, deteriorating learning outcomes for children and incidences of mental health issues.

While the Pacific is expected to return to economic growth in 2022 and 2023, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts that the gross domestic product (GDP) of about half of the PICTs will not return to their pre-COVID levels until 2024 or later. As a result, governments in the region continue to face fiscal hardship, which may translate into budget cuts for social sectors, adversely impacting children.

The second half of 2022 witnessed significant improvements when most PICTs reopened their borders, paving the way for economic recovery, implementation of programmes and renewed partnerships. The pandemic also renewed focus and investments into public health systems, providing an opportunity to build on COVID-19 response and improve public health in the region.

Within this context, in July 2022, leaders at the 51st Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting endorsed the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent as the overarching blueprint to advance Pacific. Leaders reiterated the importance of a long-term vision for the region, highlighting importance of Pacific diplomacy to promote social, cultural, environmental and economic progress for all Pacific Islanders.

UNICEF supported PICTs' COVID-19 response efforts through technical assistance, procurement and delivery of supplies to achieve the goal of vaccinating at least 80 per cent of the target population (adults and children 5 years of age and above in all PICTs, except Kiribati, which targeted all people over 12 years of age). The target vaccination rates were met in nine countries, with seven exceeding 90 per cent coverage.

Based on World Health Organization (WHO)/UNICEF joint estimates of national immunization rates in 2021, eight PICTs exceeded global target of 90 per cent coverage for the third dose of the diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus (DPT3) vaccine, and seven of these eight PICTs exceeded Pacific targets of 95 per cent. Coverage in RMI, FSM, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu remained below targets. A declining overall pattern was observed in measles vaccination, with only six PICTs achieving coverage of 90 per cent. RMI, FSM, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were found to be clearly below measles vaccination coverage targets. No country reported a vaccine-preventable disease

outbreak in 2022. Introduction of three new vaccines (pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV), rotavirus vaccine and human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine) was completed in seven PICTs and partially completed in two.

The triple burden of malnutrition in the Pacific poses a huge challenge to children's development outcomes. Although stunting rates improved between 2016 and 2022 in Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu, overweight/obesity and anaemia are widespread in all population subgroups, while childhood stunting remains a significant public health issue.

Available data on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 reveal that children's rights to safely managed water and sanitation and to practice safe and healthy hygiene are not being fully realized. Across the 14 PICTs, approximately 747,000 people lack access to at least basic sanitation services, and an estimated 377,000 people lack access to at least basic drinking water services. Services in rural areas are significantly less available than in urban areas. There is increasing concern around water safety and security, including due to climate change and environmental degradation. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICSs) indicated high levels of drinking water contamination across Pacific countries which has already generated debate and calls for actions in Countries. Open defecation rates remain high in Solomons and Kiribati.

Access to early childhood education (ECE) had improved from 2017 baselines in most countries, but progress has slowed or reversed in recent years. Most recent data shows that universal or near-universal primary enrolment has been achieved in the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Tonga, Samoa and Palau, but rates are low and declining in FSM, RMI and Solomon Islands.

Results from the 2021 round of Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) show a concerning drop in regional learning outcomes from 2018 for numeracy and reading among Year 4 students, although writing performance has improved. While these decreases may be related to the disruptions to education caused by COVID-19, there is need for further analysis to adequately address the drivers behind poor learning outcomes.

PICTs continued implementation of COVID-19 education response plans to ensure learning continuity, safe school operations and student well-being due to intermittent school closures and reopenings throughout 2022 depending on COVID-19 transmissions.

Violence against children in the Pacific remains a real concern. All 14 countries have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but only a third are on track with reporting obligations. Child protection systems are largely in early stages of development, with limited access to qualified technical assistance or trained social workers. Violence against children is a sensitive issue in the Pacific, with traditional practices and cultural norms sometimes contributing to children's vulnerability to violence across the PICTs. Vast resources have been invested into addressing violence against women in the Pacific, but investments in prevention of violence against children remains inadequate.

The pandemic's impact was compounded by the vulnerability of the Pacific to recurrent natural disasters and climate-related shocks. During 2022, PICTs experienced three humanitarian emergencies,

including a volcanic eruption and tsunami in Tonga, affecting 99 per cent of the country's population; drought in Kiribati, with 79 per cent of the population affected; and drought in Tuvalu, where 86 per cent of the country's population were experiencing drought as the first community transmission of COVID-19 was detected.

Major contributions and drivers of results

COVID-related restrictions continued to pose challenges for programme implementation across all PICTs in 2022. Humanitarian crises compounded the effects of the pandemic, with a volcanic eruption and subsequent tsunami in Tonga and extreme drought conditions in Kiribati and Tuvalu. Despite these unprecedented challenges, UNICEF made significant progress towards improving the health and well-being of children in the Pacific.

Improving and sustaining health and nutrition services

Supporting COVID-19 vaccination and national pandemic responses remained a priority across all PICTs. UNICEF played a crucial role in ensuring the availability of vaccines and related supplies, staff readiness, adequate cold chain space and sufficient funding to roll-out COVID-19 vaccination to children and adults, especially in sparsely populated outer islands.

Supporting the COVID response, UNICEF provided PICTs with essential health supplies, including 6.7 million masks, 17.7 million gloves, 130,000 protection coveralls, 308,000 face-shields, 337 high-performance tents, 71,000 COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, 1.1 million rapid diagnostic tests and 495 oxygen therapy devices. The cold chain and immunization supply chain were further strengthened to facilitate COVID-19 vaccination with the provision of an additional 60,000 litres of vaccine storage capacity and 7,400 litres of freezer capacity. Moving forward, investments made through COVID-19 response into the health sector will enable governments to address critical gaps in routine immunization. By the end of November 2022, UNICEF had supported the delivery of over 2.64 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines.

The introduction of three new vaccines (PCV, rotavirus vaccine and HPV vaccine) was completed in seven PICTs and partially completed in two. The three childhood vaccines were included in the routine schedule in the Cook Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga and Tuvalu. Plans were developed to initiate HPV vaccination in Vanuatu and Kiribati in mid-2023, enabling countries to focus on health outcome for adolescent girls.

The integration of COVID-19 vaccination and routine immunization was initiated in Solomon Islands. To address low measles coverage, UNICEF provided technical and financial support for catch-up campaigns in Kiribati, RMI and FSM. A targeted measles vaccination campaign was conducted in Fiji. No country reported a vaccine-preventable disease outbreak in 2022.

Acknowledging challenges related to food security, diet diversification and practices overall, UNICEF supported governments to promote healthy eating and diversified diets through multiple platforms, working with community health workers, women's groups, community and faith-based organizations and media platforms, particularly in Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. UNICEF continued its collaboration with the Pacific Island Food Revolution (PIFR) by airing four Pacific Kids Food Revolution (PKFR) 'school lunch' episodes in Fiji, RMI, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu through their national television channels. A new campaign, 'My Healthy Plates', was designed for Fiji and will be promoted across health and education platforms.

A comprehensive review of existing nutrition policies and programmes, including barriers to access and recommendations to address all forms of malnutrition was completed for all 14 PICTs. School nutrition environment assessment tools were pre-tested in 10 schools in Fiji, which will be further

adopted and rolled out in Fiji and other PICTs in 2023.

Improving access to WASH

UNICEF successfully supported the most vulnerable PICTs to ensure adequate, equitable and affordable access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) despite natural disasters, supply chain challenges and difficult access to remote islands.

Significant progress was made on improving WASH in schools, health care facilities and communities. A total of 178 schools across the Pacific were reached with supplies, improved handwashing facilities, the rehabilitation of WASH facilities and the promotion of menstrual hygiene and health (MHH). These activities supported the safe reopening of schools after COVID-related closures. With UNICEF support, WASH in health care facilities were upgraded in Fiji, Kiribati, FSM and Vanuatu. In Solomon Islands, UNICEF supported Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) implementation across 98 communities in two provinces, with seven communities declared open defecation free.

Emergency support was provided to Tonga in the aftermath of volcanic eruption and tsunami, including the provision 3800 WASH kits to the Ministry of Health (MoH). UNICEF provided technical assistance to strengthen national capacity for coordination, information management and monitoring. Timely support was provided to Kiribati and Tuvalu on droughts responses by way of groundwater assessments, community engagement activities and drinking water quality monitoring. Key donors providing funding were the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

The enabling environment for WASH was strengthened through UNICEF's technical support for monitoring and collection of quality data related to SDG 6. UNICEF supported the Government of Fiji to finalize the National Water and Sewerage Act and national water point survey. Data from the WASH in Health Care Facilities survey is being used for planning in Fiji, Kiribati, FSM and Solomon Islands. The first-ever Pacific WASH financing landscape survey was completed, providing critical insights on funding availability for WASH from official development assistance (ODA), Pacific governments and households. WASH policies/guidelines for schools & healthcare facilities were reviewed and updated in Solomon Islands and Kiribati.

The foundational work done by UNICEF on the climate rationale for WASH is yielding results. During 2022, a proposal to the Global Climate Fund (GCF) was approved, providing USD\$23 million for the water sector in Vanuatu over five years. The grant will be implemented by SPC, with support from UNICEF.

Expanding access to quality education

UNICEF worked in close partnership with PICTs during 2022, providing technical and financial support to strengthen the enabling environment for ECE, including improving data availability, supporting national education sector planning, strengthening the regional evidence base and guidance on inclusive ECE, and designing a system of consultations to inform the development of national statements of commitment for the Transforming Education Summit.

ECE was prioritized through policy and sector planning in Solomon Islands, where national ECE regulations were included for the first time in the Education Bill, and in FSM, where a compulsory ECE policy has been submitted to the Legislature. Kiribati, FSM, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu all strengthened their ECE curricula.

Robust education sector planning was advanced in Solomon Islands, where a five-year National Education Action Plan (NEAP) was finalized and launched. PICTs strengthened the collection and use of data for education-related planning. In Kiribati, an Education Statistical Digest covering 2015-2020 was drafted, with Ministry of Education officials trained on data analysis. Education MICS workshops were held in Fiji and Tonga to inform sector analysis and planning. Kiribati and Vanuatu continued to strengthen the use of school quality standards at the primary and secondary levels.

A Regional Review of Inclusive Education, including country profiles for 15 countries (including Papua New Guinea), was finalized and launched, expanding the regional knowledge base on education policies, programmes and data collection mechanisms, with a special focus on learners with disabilities and out-of-school children.

In preparation for the global Transforming Education Summit held in September, 10 PICTs conducted consultations with a wide range of stakeholders, including youth, with consultation findings informing National Statements of Commitments.

PICTs continued to implement COVID-19 education response plans to ensure learning continuity, safe school operations and student well-being throughout school closures and reopenings, building on contingency planning and drawing on lessons learned from previous closures. As community transmission of COVID-19 affected some PICTs for the first time in 2022, requiring school closures, distance learning was utilized in Kiribati, RMI, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. UNICEF responded to the volcanic eruption in Tonga, supporting the distribution of education in emergencies (EiE) supplies and trainings on safe school reopening and psychosocial support (PSS).

Child protection system-building

The data available suggest that the prevalence of Violence Against Children (VAC) has either remained unchanged or has increased in Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa and Solomon Islands, with the caveat that this may be due to differences in data sets (e.g., community-based participatory research (CBPR) versus MICS) or confidence in reporting. Further MICS studies will enable more accurate data comparison. UNICEF continued to strengthen CP in the Pacific following the social-ecological model to prevent and respond to VAC, in all settings including online investing in strengthening the legislative and regulatory frameworks for CP, while continuing to build the capacity of the social workforce, increasing access to prevention and response services, and engaging communities to address the drivers of violence against girls and boys. As part of the advocacy on VAC, UNICEF also engaged actively with UN Women, donors, and key civil society organizations to establish clear linkages between Violence Against Women and VAC, drawing attention to the inter-generational dimensions of violence.

Solomon Islands launched their Child and Family Welfare Act in 2022, while Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu progressed their CP bills to the point where they are expected to be passed into law in 2023. UNICEF also engaged with Fiji and Solomon Islands to undertake studies on the economic burden of VAC, which will generate important evidence on how investments in CP systems will lead to reducing VAC and its economic burden in the long term. This work will be crucial in advocating for increased investments in CP systems in PICTs.

Access to CP services was improved by building the capacity of the social workforce through the continued roll-out of the five-week CP case management training package for new and existing social welfare officers, together with in-service support delivered by technical specialists in Fiji, Kiribati, RMI, FSM, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Additional progress was made in integrating CP into the education and health sectors, including in Fiji, the first country in the region to have an up-to-date comprehensive CP-in-health policy.

With regard to civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS), evidence suggests that the proportion of children under 5 years of age whose births have been registered with a civil authority has increased in several PICTs. This is partly due to the impact of UNICEF's support to CRVS systems (e.g., reviewing policies and business processes and training frontline staff to link birth notification and birth registration) in Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Moving forward, UNICEF will continue to provide technical support to improve CRVS systems, especially in countries where the rates of birth registration have not increased.

UNICEF continued to support interventions at the community level to strengthen community CP mechanisms, including engaging communities in dialogues on the drivers of VAC. UNICEF continued to work with the Pacific Council of Churches (PCC) on safe churches and community engagement.

Joint development of operations procedures for Social Welfare and Health workers as well as review of tip-sheets on CP in Emergencies and GBV in Emergencies mainstreaming across various sectors and joint progress monitoring was carried out with relevant UN agency cluster leads. UNICEF served as the inter-agency lead on PSEA and supports institutional capacity of multi-agency partners on safeguarding.

Improving evidence and social protection for children

Social protection is increasingly becoming part of government policy responses to the economic impact of COVID. Taking advantage of the increased awareness and buy-in of social protection by PICT governments, UNICEF strategically strengthened its efforts towards building shock-responsive social protection systems and programmes. Specific contributions included the development of social protection policies based on sector reviews, improved social protection governance and management, and design and implementation of child-friendly social protection interventions. An example is the humanitarian cash transfer programme in response to Tonga's volcanic eruption/tsunami, benefiting approximately 3,000 households with children and/or persons with disabilities in affected areas.

In 2022, the roll-out of MICSs continued, including the launch of Fiji's MICS results and planning surveys in FSM, Nauru and Vanuatu. The results of Fiji's MICS were published online, including a user-friendly interactive dashboard, and was adopted as one of the core surveys to monitor the 132 Pacific Sustainable Development Indicators (PSDI), providing evidence to inform budgets, programmes and policies for children. Implementation of a 'MICS Plus' was planned with Samoa government partners, involving longitudinal, representative household surveys with interviews to be conducted over the phone in a cost-effective manner.

UNICEF organized a Pacific regional MICS workshop to strengthen the capacity of national statistics offices (NSOs) to collect high-quality and disaggregated data and enhance their understanding of MICS methodologies, tools, protocols and standards. As a result, the levels of awareness, knowledge and interest around MICSs were significantly enhanced, with more PICTs committing to carry out MICSs between 2023 and 2025.

WASH sector financing analyses were conducted in PICTs, which will contribute to evidence-based advocacy to leverage WASH financing and help build climate-resilient WASH services.

The governance and management of social protection and information systems were strengthened. UNICEF supported feasibility studies and the development and deployment of the Social Protection Management Information Systems (SPMIS) in the Cook Islands and Niue. The comprehensive SPMIS' will help strengthen the shock responsiveness of existing social protection systems and programmes for children and women. The SPMIS' will also provide reliable and timely data to inform social protection policies and programmes, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and future climate-induced disasters.

Sustaining commitments for early childhood development

Nine PICTs have developed multi-sectoral national early childhood development (ECD) policies, costed action plans and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks, with Kiribati, RMI, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu having finalized their drafts.

Fiji, FSM, Samoa, Tokelau and Tuvalu initiated nationwide consultations to inform ECD policy tools. UNICEF supported a regional inter-governmental council to advocate for ECD investments as a pathway to climate change action. In Solomons, UNICEF trained 20 workforce leaders on the basics of ECD, who will cascade the training within their sectors. Also in Solomon Islands, UNICEF implemented a comprehensive parenting support programme (PSP), reaching 1,553 parents and caregivers.

UNICEF's technical support to the Pacific Regional Council for Early Childhood Development (PRC4ECD) led to renewed commitment from several governments to prioritize investments in ECD towards fostering human capital. On the sides of the 2022 Pacific Leaders Forum in Fiji, UNICEF leveraged its role as the Secretariat of PRC4ECD to advocate for multi-sector policymaking and coordination of ECD programmes, placing it on the agenda of Pacific Island Governments, with the Prime Ministers of Fiji and Samoa expressing public support for investments in early years. With UNICEF's support, PRC4ECD launched its Pacific Child Website, a platform that enables Pacific countries to exchange information, learning, and resources across the region.

UNICEF supported the governments of Kiribati, RMI, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu with multi-sectoral expenditure tracking and budget analyses for ECD. The results of the analyses were incorporated into a paper disseminated at the 2022 Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM). The paper highlighted how appropriate and effective ECD systems are critical in effectively responding to human capital shocks brought about by events such as COVID-19 and contributing to long-term socio-economic development.

UNICEF also helped monitor progress on ECD via a regional status report. A comprehensive survey was designed in consultation with PICTs to ensure the survey methodology was context-relevant and responsive to the needs of the Pacific. Data analyses from the 14 PICTs and Papua New Guinea have been completed, and a draft report is being reviewed by UNICEF and Pacific governments, with plans to disseminate the report before the 2023 Pacific ECD Forum.

In response to COVID-19, UNICEF mobilized US\$15.8 million from the governments of Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand and the United States of America, as well as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), COVAX, Global Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) and the Pacific Community (SPC). UNICEF collaborated with the COVAX Facility to assist PICTs to comply with COVAX requirements for selecting, ordering and receiving COVID-19 vaccines. UNICEF also formed partnerships with national and regional organizations to implement national COVID-19 response plans.

UNICEF collaborated with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other UN agencies to expand nutrition programmes in the Cooks Islands, Kiribati, RMI, FSM, Niue, Palau and Tokelau.

Strategic WASH partners included a range of donors, including Australia, the European Union, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand and the United States of America. WASH-related partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continued to grow.

Regarding ECE, UNICEF actively engaged as an implementing agency for Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF), together with regional institutions, including University of the South Pacific (USP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and Pacific Community Education Quality Assessment Programme (EQAP). UNICEF is the lead agency on partnership activities on ECE, coordinating closely with countries to support emerging Pacific Early Learning Taskforce. UNICEF acted as the grant agent for Global Partnership for Education (GPE) grants in six countries, and as a partner in two others.

UNICEF engaged with United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to strengthen CRVS and birth registration systems to 'Get Everyone in the Picture', thus 'Leaving No One Behind' and ensuring all children have legal identity to access to social services.

UNICEF also engaged with UN Women and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) around the policies, procedures and referral pathways for the prevention, management and response to violence against children and women.

Leveraging the influence and reach of PCC at the community level across the Pacific, UNICEF extended the partnership with PCC, focusing on safe churches and community engagement in social and behaviour change (SBC) initiatives. A joint programme between UNICEF, UNDP and International Labour Organization (ILO) was established to strengthen the institutional capacity of key stakeholders to develop and deliver shock-responsive social protection systems in Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu.

UNICEF established a new partnership with the World Food Programme (WFP) to support PICTs in developing minimum expenditure baskets.

With UNICEF's leadership and management, and in support of the Secretary General's Reform Agenda, the One UN initiative and UNSDCF, the evaluation of the UN Pacific Strategy was successfully completed in 2022.

UNICEF strengthened its partnerships with social sector ministries and NSOs to conduct multi-dimensional child deprivation analyses to improve the quality and relevance of child poverty estimates in Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu.

UNICEF initiated grassroots engagement and partnerships with young climate activists and organizations to promote their meaningful participation in high-level decision-making spaces, such as the COP27 in Egypt and the 2022 Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on DRR in Australia.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major catalyst for innovation, creating significant opportunities for programmatic learning and improvements beyond the immediate emergency response.

The integration of COVID-19 into routine immunization programmes and primary health care is an opportunity to reach high-risk populations, remote outer islands and children who have missed out on routine vaccination, nutrition screening and micronutrient supplementation.

The downstream programme planning and implementation support UNICEF provided to the PICTs around COVID-19 vaccines provided an opportunity to work with MoHs and other stakeholders, which strengthened collaboration and partnership, especially in countries where UNICEF conventionally works in upstream advocacy, policy and strategy.

COVID highlighted the fact that PICTs lack adequate SBC strategies to respond to public health emergencies, with sparse data being a particular problem. UNICEF used U-Report polls and the Ona platform to conduct assessments of people's views, perceptions, motivators and barriers to vaccination. For example, U-Report COVID vaccination polls were launched in Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and FSM and the results were presented to each Ministry of Health so that the voices of U-Reporters were reflected to the programming. U-Ambassadors (youth advocates for U-Report) participated in the co-creation of poll questions.

Demonstrating (and documenting) solutions to close gaps in the quality and sustainability of WASH services in communities, schools and health care facilities proved successful in leveraging additional resources and partnerships for achieving results at scale. For example, in Vanuatu, the community Drinking Water Safety and Security Planning approach (nurtured and tested by UNICEF) generated USD\$23 million through a Green Climate Fund (GCF).

The delivery of emergency response actions with limited human resource capacity and no in-country UNICEF capacity proved challenging, especially in the initial stages of the COVID pandemic, when the need for local information is urgent, and access is challenging. Also, the lack of long-term

agreements (LTAs) with local service providers negatively impacted the efficiency of the response. Mobilizing a dedicated, in-country UNICEF liaison officer in countries struck by natural disasters, pre-positioning supplies and locally procuring WASH emergency supplies proved essential for the timely response to COVID and humanitarian crises. Moving forward, systematic market analyses of local suppliers and technical experts, and the subsequent establishment of LTAs with quality local entities would be a valuable part of emergency preparedness.

As COVID-19 continued to spread throughout the region in 2022, with some countries experiencing their first community transmission and school closures, knowledge sharing between countries allowed for better informed and more efficient responses.

Despite incremental advances in developing policy and legislative frameworks, building the capacity of PICTs' social workforce and engaging communities on the drivers of violence, evidence suggests that very little impact has been made on reducing the prevalence of VAC. Considering the scale and life-long consequences of VAC, the CP sector is insufficiently resourced and ill-equipped to adequately prevent and respond to the problem. Without adequate financial and human resource investments, VAC will continue.

Enacting legislation and endorsing multi-sectoral policies, plans and procedures takes time and requires lengthy, comprehensive consultation processes, engagement across multiple sectors, joint visioning processes, early identification and adaptive resolution of bottlenecks and ongoing advocacy. Changes in critical staff posts during the process inevitably slowed these processes, while COVID restrictions impacted the capacity of partners to meet and travel to outer islands for consultations.

While the standard five-week CP social work training course has been a seminal resource in improving the capacity of the social service workforce in the region, it remains an entry-level course. Access to sustainable options for further education and training opportunities on more complex areas of CP is required. As countries in the region reopen following the pandemic, in-person and hybrid delivery of training and other capacity-building activities were initiated to continue supporting the learning process. Moving forward, UNICEF will explore opportunities with key partners to sustain this investment, including through accreditation by learning entities such as USP to deliver the course as an elective, specialization or as part of a standalone certificate or diploma.

Publishing the Fiji MICS results via a user-friendly interactive online dashboard proved to be an effective way to disseminate the results widely at low cost.

Evidence-based advocacy, effective governance and efficient management of the social protection system are critical for strengthening the resilience of existing social protection programmes to respond to shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-induced disasters.

COVID-19 border and movement restrictions were a key factor in the delay of the ECD policies. Given that borders started opening in late 2022, UNICEF has been catching up on in-person monitoring and technical support, thereby accelerating the development and finalization of ECD policies and tools. While political transitions in Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu threatened to reverse progress, UNICEF continued to advocate on the importance of ECD with government partners.

UNICEF is strengthening advocacy on ECD as an integral part of the climate-resilience agenda in the region. A scoping mission led by RMI's Government to the 27th Conference of Parties (COP27) was supported to maximize opportunities to include ECD in the climate change discourse. UNICEF also supported PICTs in ensuring that a climate change lens is included in their national ECD policies.

Moving into 2023, UNICEF will work closely with bilateral partners, donors, multilateral and regional organizations to enhance support on climate financing and action including investments in climate-resilient infrastructure, improve nutritional outcomes for children, address violence against children, and promote learning outcomes and skills. UNICEF is strategically positioned due to the organization's capacity to create coherence between humanitarian and development programming. It provides UNICEF opportunities for high-level strategic engagement with key decision makers raising visibility for children in law, policies, and programmes and to address structural gender inequities that prevent young girls from having equal opportunities. This unique position will be strategically utilized to reinforce regional dialogue, particularly with and through young people as key decision-makers on matters of governance.