

Iran (Islamic Republic of)

Update on the context and situation of children

The Islamic Republic of Iran, with a population of 84 million (23 million children), 75 per cent of whom reside in urban areas, continued to face prolonged recession and stagflations in 2022. The adverse impacts of the economic downturn have disrupted the country's development trajectory. The sub-optimal economic activity, further aggravated by sanctions, low oil revenues widened the fiscal deficit, leading to significant inflationary pressures and currency depreciation. Released by the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI), the average annual inflation rate by December 2022 was at 46.3% resulting in increased vulnerabilities among the households, especially those in the lowest income deciles.

Iranian social protection system is a cash transfer centered system and all the other service-oriented programmes rely heavily on this modality. Rampant inflation and widening fiscal deficit are directly detrimental to efficiency of such system by eroding the capacity of transfers in delivering impact leading to a drop in coverage of social services and decreased disposable incomes.

In the second half of 2022, the Government announced the removal of subsidies on essential items of the Iranian food basket (bread and flour-based products, dairy products, eggs, and poultry, as well as cooking oils). This drastic measure was caused by mounting fiscal pressure of subsidies on government finances given rising global food prices. The government announced counter measures to balance the negative impacts of these policies on household welfare by increasing the national social protection cash transfers by ten folds. Nonetheless, securing national funds to sustain the scheme is yet to be confirmed as the 7th national development plan is yet to be presented to the parliament.

The Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare (MCLSW), in a report published in December 2022, announced that currently 26 million Iranians or almost one-third of the population, are living below the poverty line. In the same report, it is established that the median calorie per capita consumption among Iranian has fallen below the standard threshold since 2018 and is persistently declining. This can signal the deterioration of children's nutritional status across the country.

Exacerbated by continued sanctions, people's living conditions have become more difficult than ever. In a report published in September 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on *Unilateral Coercive Measures*, following a visit to the country, called for the removal of unilateral sanctions on Iran, detailing the effect of decades of embargos on the different sectors, including on medicine and medical care for vulnerable groups including women and children.

Iran has been hosting more than three million Afghan refugees for almost four decades. With hundreds of thousands of new arrivals since 2021, the national capacity in several sectors was challenged. On the other hand, the international support has been too disproportionate compared to the scale of the influx. There are considerable gaps in addressing the needs of Afghan and host-community children, especially for accessing safe and inclusive education, health and nutrition, as well as child-focused protection services. Hence, sustained international support remains an urgent need to help the Government in maintaining and expanding inclusive policies.

Access to education is still almost universal, with 98.2 and 93.9 per cent of eligible children enrolled in primary and lower secondary education, respectively. It is worth mentioning that the pandemic provided an opportunity for the Government to focus on strengthening the education system to help children catch up, reverse the learning losses, and make the national education system more resilient to future shocks, despite approximately 3.5 million children initially facing difficulties in accessing educational services owing to limited availability of digital equipment.

Although there was overall progress in inclusiveness of coverage, provincial disparities in accessing quality health and nutrition services persist and are reflected in inequalities in child outcomes across the country. Further development planning and supportive measures are needed to improve access to public health care, nutrition and Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) services alongside enhancing knowledge and information on healthy practices.

The range and intensity of extreme natural and weather-related events, coupled with fast-growing urbanization and inadequate disaster preparedness, are increasing the country's vulnerability to natural hazards, with effects on children. According to the Islamic Republic of Iran Meteorological Organization, the average temperature has risen by 2°C since the 1960s, and rainfall has decreased by 20 per cent in the past two decades. As a result, climate-related events, water scarcity and natural disasters are expected to become more frequent and intense.

Since September, sociopolitical unrest in Iran started with the death of a young girl, apprehended by the morality police for improperly wearing her headscarf (*hijab*). This led to a movement under the slogan of “Women, Life, Freedom.” across the country the multidimensional perspectives and root causes of this unrest likely include economic constraints and the financial burden on households. Protests and public unrest continued throughout the rest of the year in megacities, including Tehran and several other provinces, leaving a devastating impact on children and adolescents, which included detention, injuries, and deaths. According to several estimates from human rights groups, since the onset of the crisis until 31st December 2022, more than 500 people have lost their lives, of which almost 70 were children aged under 18 years. UNICEF adopted a two-track approach. First, in response to the unrest, UNICEF continued to strongly advocate with senior officials and relevant authorities for the safety and protection of children and adolescents affected by the unrest and protests, including children who were detained. UNICEF has expressed concern over the situation of children in Iran and called for the protection of their rights under all circumstances. Second, UNICEF also continued to ensure the implementation of regular programmes as per the existing programme of cooperation with the government, in the interest of the most vulnerable children across the country.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Goal Area 1-Every child survives and thrives

In 2022, UNICEF supported the development of a national Care for Child Development (CCD) service package to enhance the capacity of the health system with a focus on children's early learning, social-emotional skills, and responsive caregiving. UNICEF and the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MoHME) jointly rolled out the package in five provinces in several Service Delivery Points (SDPs) including hospitals and Primary Healthcare Centers (PHCs).

An assessment of pre- and post-COVID-19 neonatal health supported by UNICEF in 2022, revealed that the rate of child mortality, stillbirth, preterm, low birth weight, and asphyxia with need for respiratory intervention has been on the rise in the past few years. UNICEF accordingly supported an assessment of newborn resuscitation in 726 delivery rooms to inform future priorities of the MOHME towards improving newborn survival rates. Also, to complement the effectiveness of child resuscitation interventions and reduce child mortality, UNICEF supported capacity building of health professionals through provision of hands-on training materials including 77 child resuscitation mannequins to all the medical universities.

In line with the national programmes to improve exclusive breastfeeding rate in the country, UNICEF enhanced the quality of the breastfeeding counseling for pregnant and lactating women. The service providers' knowledge and skills were also improved through provision of training packages and developing breastfeeding reference textbooks, which will be followed by a workshop aiming to train master breastfeeding counselors for all medical universities.

To assist the national efforts in the prevention of all forms of malnutrition, UNICEF supported the testing of a food and nutrition surveillance system among children under five in eight food-insecure provinces with a total population of 1,668,089 out of which 75 per cent are benefiting from healthcare and nutrition services in the health facilities. The system facilitates provincial and national planning and real-time monitoring addressing the nutritional status of children under five.

Aiming at enhancing the nutritional literacy of the general public, UNICEF supported the development and distribution of nutrition information materials in 17,958 rural health houses, 5,335 urban health posts, 2838 rural health centers and 2783 urban health centers. These materials reached an estimated 5,600,000 households with children aged under five. A similar effort was made in developing training packages.

In line with efforts to enhance growth monitoring of children under five, UNICEF supported standard improvements in 140 SDPs in four provinces and helped enhance the micronutrient status of 3000 children aged under two years and 1000 pregnant and lactating women in seven provinces in settlements as well as the host community. UNICEF has also established a baby friendly corner in the Fariman refugee settlement to provide a safe space for breastfeeding.

Drawing on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 response, the importance of targeted and evidence-based awareness raising among vulnerable children and communities on public preparedness and response to health hazards became evident. In this respect, UNICEF, MoHME and World Health Organisation (WHO), developed a Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) strategy. Similarly, to support reducing the risk of water borne diseases in Hormozgan, 50 health ambassadors at provincial level were trained to apply SBC strategies to control the spread of Aedes mosquito and prevent Dengue fever. Deploying the same SBC strategy, UNICEF supported training of 40 Afghan health ambassadors and volunteers to address vaccine hesitancy and promote vaccine intake in 6 at risk provinces.

In support of the national harm reduction programmes, through providing Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services for vulnerable and at-risk young people, UNICEF facilitated access for HIV-infected and affected adolescent girls and boys by integration of adolescent-friendly and gender-sensitive MHPSS and Provider Initiated HIV Testing (PIT) services in the Voluntary Counselling and Testing centres and building the capacity of 48 counsellors in six provinces. Moreover, to enhance access, quality, and relevance of MHPSS services, "Adolescent Behavioral Risk Reduction Counselling" was integrated into PHCs by developing a standard service package and training 280 counsellors at national level.

To maintain the consistency of MHPSS services and increase community resilience during and after emergencies, UNICEF supported the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) in training 240 youth volunteers to establish provincial networks for the provision of MHPSS and social harm prevention using existing IRCS community platforms across the country. Similar services were offered to the refugee host communities in two cities by supporting multi-purpose centres delivering agile and gender sensitive services to over 1615 children and adolescents.

In efforts to enhance adolescent well-being, empowerment, and participation, UNICEF supported the development of an “Adolescent and Youth Social Well-Being and Empowerment” model to address their needs. The model, implemented in four provinces in partnership with the Ministry of Sports and Youth and Drug Control Headquarters, comprises MHPSS, social harm prevention, “Learning to Earning” module, and a healthy lifestyle. Thus far, the model has benefitted 400 adolescents and youth who received relevant skills towards finding a promising career.

Goal Area 2 – Every child learns

UNICEF support led to enhanced coverage of the health screening programme for school enrollment for refugees, nomad children, and children in the least disadvantaged provinces. Based on the official report, 97,454 children (46,923 girls) were screened for school preparedness. UNICEF’s intervention significantly impacted students’ participation in the health screening programme, specifically in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. In addition, the Special Education Organization used the successful partnership with UNICEF to leverage public finance for the free screening programme for the next academic year in schools located in the most vulnerable areas.

The capacity of the primary education system to provide quality education to children considering the Afghan Refugee Crisis was increased through the provision of educational materials for learning-teaching Persian, Math, Science and Geography in 500 schools with a high population of Afghan children. The equipment will lead to more interactive and hands-on learning, allowing children with different learning abilities to enjoy more support in the classroom. The intervention assisted 198,876 students, including 67,917 Afghans.

UNICEF led a series of trainings to enhance the capacity of 500 secondary boarding schools’ principals (approximately 50 per cent female) and to improve the quality of education while increasing the participation of students in decision-making and implementation of school-related activities. Boarding schools serve children and adolescents in hard-to-reach areas where daily travel to school is not possible due to distance. Half of the boarding schools in the country, serving 158,795 students (76,071 girls) were targeted under this intervention. Providing a platform for school principals to share their challenges and best practices with national officials, UNICEF contributed to improved access and quality of secondary education in some of the country’s most disadvantaged areas.

UNICEF supported training 80 master teachers from 32 provinces on developing accessible digital content for children with disabilities. The master trainers will facilitate national production of more accessible digital content by teachers for children with disabilities and special education needs. Digital content is a complimentary resource for children to practice or use diverse multimedia to deepen their learning and improve learning outcomes.

Goal Area 3 – Every child is protected from violence and exploitation

UNICEF supported MoHME and Social Welfare Organization (SWO) to strengthen national systems for the prevention of child maltreatment through a comprehensive framework addressing the underlying protective and risk factors at the individual, family, and community levels. A community-

based model aiming at promoting community engagement in prevention, early detection, and response to child maltreatment was successfully piloted in four selected provinces. As part of this programme, 89 school-aged peer educators trained 903 peers on seeking help and reporting child maltreatment. It also assessed 45 community centres against the child protective environment checklist.

UNICEF provided support to improve the knowledge and capacity of social and mental health workers of SWO's Social Emergencies Units to offer quality counselling services to children through the development of national protocols and specialised skills training guidelines on thematic areas such as self-care and children and adolescents at risk of suicide. Furthermore, the capacity building of over 65 social workers of 31 provinces serving in children's hospitals on preventing child maltreatment contributed to early identification and provision of specialised protection services and referrals.

Building on the previous efforts, UNICEF continued to support the standardisation of care and protection services for children in alternative care through advocacy and development of an evidence-based model on care plan, strengthening professional supervision mechanisms and capacity building of SWO's social workers for national scale-up of the protocol through face-to-face and on-the-job training and supervision.

A national workforce on Child Protection in Emergency (CPiE) was established in close collaboration with IRCS. This workforce was trained in a comprehensive capacity-building package on CPiE, including the global standards on psychosocial first aid and Child-Friendly Space management. Additionally, UNICEF and IRCS developed an evidence-based national Community Resilience Action Plan for IRCS Youth Organization, focusing on disaster risk reduction through children's participation.

In partnership with the Judiciary, UNICEF supported the legal and policy framework for protecting children in conflict with the law by drafting a "Guideline on Diversion of Children in Conflict with the Law" and a "Guideline on Social Reintegration of Children in Conflict with the Law". The adoption and enforcement of the Guideline on Diversion promotes the application of diversion programmes and alternatives to detention. The Guideline on Aftercare helps social workers and directors of the Juvenile Correction and Rehabilitation Centres (JCRCs) to empower children in conflict with the law and provide them with the required services to support their social reintegration and prevent recidivism.

The capacity of 'justice for children' professionals was enhanced through the training of over 700 judges, prosecutors, social workers, and law enforcement on juvenile justice standards, i.e., diversion and restorative justice in 14 provinces and training of 150 professionals regarding protecting the rights of children on the move in 5 provinces with a considerable refugee population. UNICEF continues to advocate for the use of these standards in the context of children in the ongoing sociopolitical crisis. In addition, the justice system was strengthened by reviewing existing judicial processes for children and developing a standard judicial process model. In support of adolescents in conflict with the law, UNICEF supported JCRC affiliated with the prison organization to train 120 social workers nationwide on life skills, counselling, drug prevention and parenting to increase psychosocial well-being of 1200 adolescents residing in JCRCs nationwide and facilitate their social reintegration.

Goal Area 4- Every child has access to safe and equitable water, sanitation, and hygiene services.

Water availability continued to be a challenge in Iran in 2022, with water reservoirs at an all-time low, threatening nationwide rationing. UNICEF focused WASH efforts on water scarcity mitigation and systems strengthening. To enhance the national capacity in water management, UNICEF supported a study of water scarcity drivers conducted by The Stockholm International Water Institute. Moreover, to support the identification of challenges and potential solutions, a series of activities were undertaken

to introduce and enable the adoption of WASH Bottleneck Analysis (WASHBAT) by the Ministry of Energy.

UNICEF also assisted the Government in developing a new build-back better strategy for the national water system to improve resilience and mitigate the impacts of natural disasters on the water infrastructure. The endorsed strategy has so far been rolled out in two flood-prone provinces, benefiting over 5,000 people.

UNICEF commenced construction of a 17 km water feeder line to the Niatak refugee settlement. Once completed, the line will provide access to safe water to 7,000 Afghan refugees and nearby host communities. Also, to improve hygiene and sanitation in various settlements and host communities, UNICEF supported the construction of WASH facilities, including a sewage treatment plant and provided essential hygiene items services.

As the footprint of climate change is increasingly impacting children in Iran, the Country Office launched the Climate Landscape Analysis for Children (CLAC) in October 2022. This will feed into the new country programme, while also informing UNICEF's contribution to the environment pillar of the United National Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF).

Goal Area 5 – Every child has an equitable chance in life

With the vision to reduce child poverty, UNICEF supported MCLSW to move towards a sustainable child-sensitive, integrated social protection system. UNICEF initiated knowledge sharing on global best practices by facilitating interactions, through a capacity-building platform, among social protection practitioners, policymakers, experts, and academia. It also served as an opportunity to enhance bilateral south-south collaboration and display Iran's social protection schemes for children and women. Furthermore, an analysis of the national social protection system was conducted in a partnership with the International Policy Center for Inclusive Growth in Brazil to improve integration and shock-responsiveness towards children's needs.

The south-south collaboration and study visit to Brazil inspired the design of a scalable social protection model in Iran called KIAN (Kodak Yare Iran) to support the most vulnerable households with children out or at risk of dropping out of school with cash transfers and social services. The model reached 17,011 children in 6,500 households in Harsin county (Kermanshah province). The services provide remedial education summer classes for 4,655 children, referral of 85 children living with disabilities to SWO for MHPSS services and group counselling sessions on parenting and social harms. In addition, seven technical and vocational education centres were equipped, and 464 adolescents were registered to learn skills to ensure a successful transition from learning to earning.

UNICEF facilitated and funded the execution of procedural requirements for 31,000 children born to Iranian mothers and non-Iranian fathers to acquire Iranian citizenship and to receive a national birth certificate.

UNICEF partnered with SCI to enhance national and sub-national capacities for child-focused data collection and analysis of child poverty. The partnership enhanced data-driven policy-making capacity of the national partner. Seven policy briefs were generated through this partnership. Socio-economic impact of COVID-19 was studied/explored in Iranian context and child-focused Sustainable Development Goals indicators were developed. Moreover, the feasibility of collecting panel data on child development as well as monitoring child indicators was assessed. Equal access to health services, child labour in Iran and education inequalities were among other topic treated in this partnership.

Communication and Advocacy

In 2022, Iran country office shifted the focus of its public and media advocacy to new UNICEF global advocacy priority areas such as routine immunization, tackling the learning crisis and promoting mental health. Reaching out to almost one million people, UNICEF Iran actively engaged with its diverse audiences on digital platforms through several social media campaigns including Immunization, Mental Health, Breastfeeding, etc. The immunization social media campaign alone reached over 500,000 people to support UNICEF's 'unlock fundraising mechanism' using the Hashtag #LongLifeFor. It was followed by producing several immunization-related contents, including video messages for the UNICEF Iran Goodwill Ambassador, subtitled videos of UNICEF HQ social media on vaccination, and infographics developed jointly with MOHME and WHO on the importance of routine immunization.

In line with enhancing children's ethical representation in media and partnership with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, a national competition for Iran's journalists and photojournalists was launched under the theme of "Refugee children and Iranian hospitality" to highlight the situation of refugee children in reporting and photojournalism.

To achieve the results under the current Country Programme, UNICEF Iran developed and enriched its partnerships which currently involve 14 governmental entities. The strategy in 2022 remained to reinforce the existing partnerships and explore new areas of engagement to deliver results for children based on evolving needs.

Identifying the new potentials within MoHME, UNICEF collaborated successfully with the Health Education and Promotion Office as well as with the Centre for Communicable Disease Control to deploy SBC to accelerate intended outcomes in preparedness for and response to health hazards such as prevention of vector-borne diseases. Further, UNICEF engaged with the Deputy for Treatment of MoHME to strengthen prevention, early detection and response to child maltreatment and enhance referral mechanisms for seeking assistance and case reporting.

While UNICEF strives for high-impact partnerships to target the developmental needs of children, emergency situations were also put in perspective to allow nexus programming, especially where short-term needs of a vulnerable population hampered the prioritisation of child development. In this respect, UNICEF's collaboration with Norwegian Refugee Council and Relief International addressed part of the identified needs of Afghan refugee children and their families and communities. Accordingly, several impactful programme components were developed and implemented to improve access to WASH, nutrition, counseling, and education services for these vulnerable populations.

To ensure children's issues are positioned at the centre of the wider UN planning and cooperation framework through effective engagement in and contribution to inter-agency collaborations, UNICEF Iran has been co-chairing the socio-economic pillar of the UNSDCF framework. In addition, UNICEF actively contributes to the achievement of goals of public health, environment, drug control and disaster risk reduction pillars. Under the UN Refugee Coordination Mechanism, UNICEF Iran has also been leading WASH and co-leading the education sectors in addition to playing a lead role in nutrition and child protection areas of responsibility. In an effort to enhance the coherence of the interventions by the UN team in line with the national priorities, uniform hygiene and disaster risk reduction information, education and communication materials were developed and shared with WASH cluster members to harmonise the capacity building activities.

Moreover, in collaboration with UNESCO and stakeholder national organisations, UNICEF expanded the network with academia and research institutes to strengthen non-formal education and develop disaster preparedness guidelines for children with disabilities.

UNICEF is grateful to its development and humanitarian partners for their contribution to the implementation of the Country Programme and the humanitarian response through their partnerships. International donors and UNICEF committees include the European Commission, Italy, Denmark, Norway, Austria, the Republic of Korea, Switzerland, Sweden, Danish NatCom, Swiss NatCom, the United Kingdom NatCom, German NatCom, United States Fund for UNICEF, and the private sector in Iran. In 2022 UNICEF mobilised a total of US\$6,155,049 to support children in Iran.

Innovation

In 2022, UNICEF promoted innovation as a key strategy to deliver results for children. In partnership with the Vice Presidency for Science, Technology and Knowledge-based Economy and in collaboration with Pardis Technology Park, UNICEF launched the Second Innovation Challenge to identify, assess, and support the top innovative solutions that address the challenges faced by children and adolescents and to sensitize the broader innovation ecosystem in Iran. As a result, 29 solutions were received and reviewed carefully against pre-defined criteria and the following top three solutions were selected:

1. **CYCLOPS:** Use of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms via play therapy in a Virtual Reality (VR) setting to assist the treatment of Amblyopia in children
2. **Robokidz:** An interactive narrative-based theme park that offers children a renewed chance at edutainment using AI and robotics
3. **Jobzi:** A mobile school that provides services to the children in street situation in Tehran

UNICEF has planned a mentorship programme under which the above solutions will receive a low-interest rate loan, technical guidance, support for potential partnerships, and grants by graduation.

Opportunities, Challenges and Lessons Learned

Showcasing the successful implementation of a health screening programme for school children living in vulnerable areas, UNICEF Iran empowered the Ministry of Education to negotiate increasing the share of the national budget allocated to this programme for the following year. Such an achievement calls for a greater attention to evidence-based advocacy to increase impactful public expenditure on children. Hence, embedding of Public Finance for Children across programmes was introduced and adopted as a key strategy for UNICEF Iran since late 2022.

To support evidence generation for an informed programme adaptation, in 2022, UNICEF initiated an evaluation of one of its adolescent wellbeing programmes with key questions around efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, sustainability, coherence, as well as child's rights and gender considerations. In addition to UNICEF's accountability to the affected populations and other key stakeholders, the evaluation recommendations will allow for enhancement of the programme design to be more responsive to UNICEF's mandate as well as to the contextual, programmatic, and operational constraints in Iran.

On a larger scale and given the evolving context in the country, UNICEF Iran has begun the shift towards better integration of evaluability measures when developing programmes so as to boost programme effectiveness. To this end, UNICEF Iran has identified the need for also more investment in building the capacity of partners in result-based management to enable shifting the focus from deliverables to the intended outcome and impacts of the programmes and building the evaluation culture at the national level.

To carefully consider diverse types of risks imposed on the implementation and in line with principles of risk-informed programming, UNICEF has developed and maintained an updated risk assessment for Iran country office. This exercise enabled the integration of mitigation measures at both the planning and implementation phases. In addition, at the corporate level, UNICEF Iran underwent a thorough audit exercise in 2022 whose results were indicative of high levels of compliance with the applicable standards under various categories. An action plan has been developed based on the audit findings to contribute to the required improvements.

UNICEF continued to ensure financial accountability based on the principles of Harmonised Approach to Cash Transfer (HACT) and under UNICEF's leadership of the HACT inter-agency committee. This year witnessed tremendous progress with several implementing partners audited and micro-assessed on their compliance with relevant quality assurance standards and their operation and programmatic capacities, respectively. Analysis of routine spot checks also served as an appropriate foundation for conducting comprehensive refresher training for the implementing partners to increase their compliance with HACT and hence reduce the likelihood and impact of financial risks. As a lesson learned, UNICEF is incorporating HACT requirements into the programme design and financial plans of the interventions to align them with the payment modalities.

In terms of supply and procurement, despite the complications created by sanctions and the economic turmoil, in 2022, UNICEF further developed its capacity to procure supplies amounting to US\$5.4 million, including specialized medicine for children impacted by sanctions. This included the procurement of nebulizers for 1,104 children suffering from Cystic Fibrosis and Epidermolysis Bullosa (EB) bandages for 800 children suffering from EB.

Further support was given to MoHME to maintain and improve vaccine management through the provision of cold chain equipment and procurement of equipment for 19 walk-in cold rooms in thirteen provinces with refugee population. Also, as part of the contribution to the refugee response in Iran, since 2021, UNICEF procured 600,000 Measles and Rubella vaccines to support the government's immunization campaign for children aged under 15 in thirteen provinces.

Several challenges were encountered during the procurement of supplies. Sanctions have been the major bottleneck to the offshore procurement process as many suppliers refuse to either sell or ship to Iran. This has put the children at higher risk, especially when emergency or pressing needs are of concern. Nationally, higher coordination is required to facilitate smooth and agile Customs clearance to accelerate the implementation pace and hence respond to the programmatic needs timely and effectively.