

Cuba

Update on the context and situation of children

During 2022, the country continued to go through a deep economic crisis, which has marked the Cuban context for several decades. This structural economic crisis, coupled with the continuation of sanctions imposed on the country, has been worsened by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and of global processes that have brought about increased limitations in accessing fuel and essential supplies, as well as shortages in power generation, among other issues.

While between 2020 and 2021 Cuba lost 13 per cent of its GDP, a small recovery took place in 2022, when a growth of only 2 per cent was achieved with respect to 2021, below the projected 4 per cent. Inflation at the end of 2022 has been estimated to be about 40 per cent, with obvious implications in the rising prices of goods and services, and the weakening of conditions to satisfy the needs of communities and families, especially of those in a situation of vulnerability (Ministry of Economy and Planning -MEP-, 2022).

The sustained effects of the economic crisis and the shortage of resources intensify the difficulties in recovering welfare indicators such as the total maternal mortality rate, which was 40.9 per 100,000 live births in 2022, or under one year mortality rate which reached the end of the year 7.5 deaths per 1,000 live births, in contrast with the same indicator in 2020, when a 4.9 rate was recorded (Ministry of Health -MINSAP-, 2022 / Cubadebate 2023). MINSAP has also officially established declared that low weight at birth is among the main causes of death in children under 1, which is consistent with the limitations this scenario imposes on access to nutritious food at crucial developmental stages.

However, the country has managed to maintain a high level of COVID vaccination coverage. MINSAP reports that 10,006,775 people, representing 90.3 per cent of the Cuban population, have been vaccinated against COVID. Notably, the coverage of the National Expanded Programme of Vaccination, which includes 13 vaccines, has maintained its historical coverage of over 90 per cent.

Other events affecting the general population and children in particular during the year include several unprecedented emergency situations, including the explosion at the Saratoga Hotel in Havana in May, a major fire at the oil depot base in Matanzas in August and Hurricane Ian in September. The explosion in Havana resulted in the deaths of 47 people (4 children) and caused injuries to 99 people, with structural damages reported in several buildings, including an elementary school and adjacent houses. The fire in Matanzas caused 17 deaths and injuries in 146 people. The Hurricane Ian (category 3) severely affected 1.1 million people in the provinces of Pinar del Río and Artemisa, leaving three dead, more than 100,000 houses damaged and over 76,000 people in evacuation centres.

The education sector was severely impacted with 477 schools damaged and the interruption of their water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) systems. Lack of regular investments affected the ability of local governments to rapidly re-connect energy and water systems. According to the Ministry of Education (MINED), educational centres are requiring urgent investment to satisfy the basic WASH needs of children and adolescents and water and sanitation networks and hygiene facilities in the affected centres were partially or totally closed. By the end of year, 159 school centres reopened, representing 33 per cent of the total damaged centres.

In spite of the above, positive steps have been taken to guarantee the protection of children and adolescents, such as the approval of the Code of Families, which will generate an additional review of the legal and normative framework and the opportunity to elaborate new protocols and procedures in

line to international standards for the protection of children rights.

Major contributions and drivers of results

During 2022, UNICEF supported MINSAP in training 2,741 health workers, strengthening their knowledge of food security and nutritional education. In collaboration with UNDP, UNICEF scaled the intervention on prevention of overweight and obesity in schoolchildren to the Sancti Spiritus province.

An evaluation of 12 human milk banks (HMB) that have been supported by UNICEF, concluded that the HMB have successfully supported vulnerable children with quality pasteurized mother's milk. The assessment recommends establishing a national strategy for the management of HMBs and the creation of a statistical information system that will enable the control, monitoring and comparison of HMBs among territories and at national level.

UNICEF, collaborating with MINSAP and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), supported 1,420 health professionals in improving their knowledge, skills on obstetric emergencies, neonatal and child health care, as well as on the general immunization programme, responding to injuries in paediatric patients, road safety education and comprehensive adolescent health. UNICEF assisted the National Road Safety Commission (CNSV) in preparing the 2022–23 National Strategic Plan for Children and Youth Road Safety, approved in October by the President of the CNSV.

UNICEF, ProSalud and a multidisciplinary team carried out a diagnosis on comprehensive adolescent health in which 1,064 adolescents from 10 municipalities in seven of the country's provinces participated, contributing to preparing a communication strategy for adolescents.

In September, the Cuban government hosted the International Health Conference, in which UNICEF accompanied and participated at the highest level with a team from HQ, RO and the CO. The event was an opportunity for UNICEF to discuss in depth the advances and challenges of the national health system (NHS), particularly regarding maternal and child health, immunization, and nutrition.

UNICEF procured vaccines for 80 per cent of children under one year, representing 88,000 doses of the triple vaccine against measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR), which the country does not produce. Supporting the effectiveness of the cold chain in 267 general clinics in primary health care and 14 maternal and childcare hospitals, UNICEF provided 487 refrigerators prequalified by the World Health Organization (WHO), temperature control accessories and other supplies such as cold boxes for vaccine transportation.

Three paediatric hospitals and two maternity hospitals now have high resolution ultrasound equipment improving the performance of diagnosis. Imaging studies, including for soft tissues, can now be ordered for more than 422,000 children and adolescents, enabling about 51,000 annual consultations to identify fetal malformations and other pathologies; 157 general clinics received paediatric scales and sphygmomanometers, improving their capacity for monitoring the growth and development of children. UNICEF Cuba supplied the NHS with essential medications for about 200,000 people.

In accordance with the agreements reached at the latest Summit on Transforming Education, UNICEF accompanied MINED in the implementation of the country commitment to advance the third round of improvement of the national education system, prioritising infrastructure repair and equipment renewal, including WASH services.

The alliances achieved with MINED have enabled the scaling up of initiatives such as supporting the

actions to cover the unmet demand of more than 30,000 pending requests for nursery school enrolment, support for the implementation of children up to 5 years centres were prioritized, articulated with health services for early childhood. This led to the opening of 19 new institutions of this kind during the year, totalling 60 at the end of 2022, with an enrolment of 1,500 children (720 of them girls). The increase was a result, among other reasons, of the training and sensitization of 161 representatives of state and business entities and local agents, as well as of 1,903 educational agents for early childhood from all over the country.

This hybrid modality for skills development (in-person and online) and the functioning of 3 digital multi-platforms proved a key approach for maintaining implementation. Likewise, technological innovation demands a strengthening of digital skills, which led to equipping eight multimedia classrooms at vocational schools and the creation of open educational resources for this educational level.

This modality also led to the strengthening of methodological and didactic skills to support inclusive education of 5,034 educational agents in early childhood; 2,036 teachers, specialists and supporting teachers from eight municipalities in La Habana and Holguín in inclusive education (1,656 women and 380 men); 1,254 teachers from 54 vocational schools from 13 of the country's provinces (937 women and 313 men); and 861 teachers and methodologists from three municipalities in Santiago de Cuba (516 women and 345 men).

A total of 1,270 teachers and families participated directly in online sessions for educational and socioemotional support.

This created the conditions for 7,875 children and adolescents to have access to schools with better-trained teachers to implement quality, inclusive and relevant education. Of that total: 376 are children with intellectual disability and/or autism, who attend regular education in eight municipalities in the provinces of Holguín and La Habana; 3,037 are adolescents (1,572 female and 1,465 male; 23 with disability), who are taught life skills at the country's 54 vocational schools; and 4,315 children and adolescents (2,157 female and 2,158 male; 175 with disability), who participate in disaster risk reduction plans (DRR) at 42 schools in three municipalities in Santiago de Cuba.

UNICEF supported training and methodological orientation on the third round of education improvement related to teaching-learning at nursery schools and preschool classrooms, thus reaching 26,282 educators for early childhood.

During the year, 9,446 families, teachers, children, and adolescents participated in actions about the change of perception and the promotion of positive attitudes on responsible parenting, inclusive education, adolescent empowerment in vocational schools and adolescent participation in DRR. During 2023, the Country Office (CO) will conduct midterm KAP surveys to measure progress.

In 2022, UNICEF played a relevant role in incorporating the children's rights approach into the recently approved Code of Families, becoming a key partner for the review of the regulatory framework thanks to the alliance with the Ministry of Justice. As part of a strategic alliance with the Ministry of Foreign Relations, UNICEF supported the monitoring of the observations recently made by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

UNICEF supported training for 150 workers at state institutions for children and adolescents without parental care, 112 professionals in the legal sector (judges and prosecutors) and 35 Ministry of the Interior officials who specialize in providing attention to children and adolescents. The training contributed to improving the management and implementation of protection services and of the new legal regulations.

UNICEF supported the strengthening of nine protective spaces, as well as of the skills of 342 professionals and local stakeholders for the prevention of and attention to all forms of violence that affect children and adolescents. The evaluation of the project Strengthening of Protective Environments in Old Havana concluded that the programme is relevant, effective, and sustainable. From 2023, three tools for the creation and strengthening of protective environments and for addressing violence against children and adolescents will be available for the 35 protective spaces UNICEF supported and for other interested parties.

Adolescent kit for expression and innovation, used by 11 community institutions and organizations from seven of the country's provinces, enabled 3,326 adolescents to acquire key abilities to face stressful circumstances, develop healthy relationships, learn new skills, and participate in a positive way in their communities, and it required the training of 257 facilitators. After the passing of the devastating Hurricane Ian, these were implemented in 10 affected communities and seven evacuation centres in three provinces, which enabled 717 adolescents and 90 people of other ages to receive support and build their resilience.

The Crianza Respetuosa (Respectful Upbringing) virtual multiplatform continued to promote violence-free upbringing with 674 mothers, fathers and caregivers, who also had access to the psychoemotional support service. The project made didactic materials and resources on positive upbringing available to 3,810 caregivers, and 250 other caregivers received information on this topic through eight community actions.

In 2022, the Mídete strategy for social and behavioural change, focusing on the prevention of all forms of violence that affect children and adolescents, reached its second year of implementation and continued to work with a complex and sensitive problem, involving its target audiences (adolescents in particular) as key agents for change. Mídete directly reached 1,443 people through 40 in-person actions and 179,449 people through social and mass media.

By supporting the institutions that work with children and adolescents without parental care, the living conditions of 205 children and adolescents (48.4 per cent of the total) improved. The integral education schools for adolescents who have engaged in behaviours classified as crimes were equipped with materials for vocational training contributing to the social rehabilitation of 150 adolescents (100 per cent of the enrolled total).

In 2022, a mid-term Gender Programmatic Review was carried out for the current cooperation cycle, noting down recommendations to incorporate gender in an integral and focused way into the design and implementation of strategies, programmes, projects and yearly work plans of the country office.

A total of 22 psychopedagogists from vocational schools and 20 prevention specialists from the Ministry of the Interior participated in training about gender-based violence (GBV) and child sexual abuse; 6,384 other professionals working on early childhood issues and 85 influencing parents participated in discussions on responsible parenting, the CO will conduct Midterm KAP surveys to measure progress. Additionally, as part of the Mídete campaign, 46 adolescents from La Habana and Granma were sensitized on positive gender standards and these strengthened their abilities to create content against violence in childhood and adolescence.

UNICEF convened and articulated various initiatives and 10 artists with a strong commitment to gender equality and the prevention of GBV were engaged in the development of conferences such as Responsible Mother and Fatherhood and Let's Talk about Sexuality, conducted by CENESEX. Similar interventions took place elsewhere, including at vocational schools (MINED) in La Habana to commemorate the Orange Day for non-violence against women and girls (the 25th of each month) and during the implementation of the kits for adolescents together with the Escaramujo project of the University of Havana collaborating with the Oscar Arnulfo Romero Center, the Center for Studies on

Youth (CESJ) and Center for Psychological and Sociological Research (CIPS).

Father from the Beginning showcased the experiences of fathers involved in providing care for their children through a travelling photo exhibition, De Pa a Pá, and it interviewed families in communities in La Habana and Pinar del Río through a talk show.

In 2022, natural disasters and other events added intensity to the economic crisis the country is undergoing. UNICEF has supported the government in these situations, in responses coordinated by the UN system through the UNETT and with close collaboration with a national, provincial and local authorities.

During the first trimester, 400 families in vulnerable communities in Havana received water tanks and hygiene kits, in continued response to the COVID-19 pandemic, while in Cienfuegos and Sancti Spiritus a total of 6,233 children between 12 and 24 months of age received a nutritional supplement in the form of multiple nutrient powders (PMN).

In May, the explosion in the Saratoga Hotel severely damaged the infrastructure of the nearby school. UNICEF provided support with the delivery of school and early childhood materials, as well as recreational materials and manuals for teachers aimed at supporting the psychoemotional recovery of 400 affected children. Additionally, it contributed to recovering water storage and hygiene conditions for the 40 families who lost their homes and possessions in the accident.

In August, a major fire raged at the oil base in Matanzas. UNICEF acquired 10 electrical pumps to improve water supply to communities close to the affected area and the hygiene conditions of 1,300 affected families.

In September, Hurricane Ian made landfall in the province of Pinar del Río. UNICEF, together with relevant authorities, focused the response on improving access to drinking water and to sanitation and hygiene for most affected families. Using resources prepositioned in the country, support was quickly provided to WASH and Education sectors.

WASH response to 6,376 families in the most severely affected communities, who received 12,755 10-litre water storage containers, while another 2,232 families improved their basic hygiene conditions with the supplying of 472 hygiene kits. The delivery of a water treatment plant to the National Institute of Water Resources (INRH), along with basic treatment supplies, benefited up to 5,000 people.

Supporting the INRH, 26 electrical pumps were acquired to supply water to communities affected by the hurricane in the municipalities of Pinar del Río, San Juan y Martínez, San Luis and Viñales.

In education, prepositioning enabled UNICEF to deliver 140 kits of school materials, 38 kits for early childhood, 154 recreation kits and 6,000 m² of waterproof covering for roofs, enabling the swift return to school of 22,640 children and adolescents from one of the most severely affected municipalities in the province of Pinar del Río, where the hurricane caused severe damage to 477 educational centres. Other supplies are being purchased and delivered to support the recovery of 318 centres that are still damaged.

With the support of UNICEF, 6,600,000 people were tested or received health treatment for COVID-19 and dengue in most vulnerable provinces, improvements in the quality of medical care and strengthening of the cold chain at 267 general clinics and 14 maternity hospitals. Additionally, 64,392 people benefited from access to safe water, improving hygiene conditions in vulnerable communities.

In 2022, the CO reached 44,916 followers on its digital platforms (2,073 new). With the reduction of

the media impact of the pandemic, 1.5 million people were reached through social media in 2022. With 207,991 users (136,325 new), UNICEF Cuba website recorded 290,420 visits, published 12 human interest stories and 53 press releases.

A total of 356,042 people were reached across all platforms with messages focusing on nutrition, emphasizing breastfeeding, overweight and obesity prevention, nutrition in pregnant women and in children as well as with messages on road safety, child and adolescent health, prevention of COVID-19 and the importance of vaccination.

Midete strategy focused on the prevention of violence directly reached 1,443 people through 40 in-person actions and 165,220 people through social and mass media channels. 349,256 people were reached through all UNICEF Cuba platforms with messages related to inclusive education and responsible parenting.

The alliance with 3 national and local radios enabled the broadcasting of the radio series *Padre no es cualquiera* (A father is not just anyone) networks reaching approximate audience of 1,046,000 people. *Padres desde el Principio* reached more than 158,170 people in social networks.

The office strengthened its crisis communication strategy for dealing with reputational risks, particularly after the involvement of children and adolescents in the demonstrations of 2021 and the sentences imposed in June 2022. It has also worked with the heads of communication of its main counterparts, including MINED and the Ministry of the Interior (MININT), to continue advocating for greater collaboration to protect children and adolescents' rights based on a comprehensive and intersectoral approach, as reflected in the positive parenting campaign.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF has been active in the execution of the Cooperation Framework of the United Nations System (UNS) with the Government of Cuba, with participation in the different inter-agency groups, including the operative management team, the interagency gender group, the interagency food and nutritional security group and UNETE, and coordinating the monitoring and evaluation interagency group, the vaccines work team and the human development and equity interagency group.

This participation has not only kept the office actions in line with the Cooperation Framework but has also facilitated progress in topics such as the implementation of the UNS gender strategy and the *Sirvió* campaign on gender stereotypes, by disseminating its communication products and sensitizing 55 adolescents and 72 professionals from the culture and education sectors, participating in the conceptualization of UNS support for the implementation of the food and nutritional sovereignty and security law, and carrying out the compiling of programme indicators related to the sustainable development indicators, thus laying the groundwork for the mid-term review of the Cooperation Framework.

UNICEF has consolidated its leading role in emergencies leading the areas of WASH and education and making substantial contributions to the health, food and nutrition sectors during the events at the Saratoga Hotel, the fire in Matanzas and the response to Hurricane Ian. This has enabled greater efficiency and coordination of the response by the UNS. The CO mobilised a total of \$2.5 million from public donors, including Korea, Canada, UNOCHA CERF and the Spanish National Committee.

The year 2022 also brought about the inclusion of new strategic allies within the current cooperation programme, with an emphasis on the coordinated work with the Ministry of Foreign Relations for its participation in the periodical review of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and in following up on its concluding observations. The alliances with the Finlay Vaccines Institute and the Center for

Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology open up collaboration opportunities for maintaining vaccination coverage and cold chain standards.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

During 2022, the CO conducted two evaluations:

- The Formative Evaluation of Human Milk Banks (HMB) that documents the need of optimize the effectiveness of the intervention processes through: (a) methodological guidelines for the management of processes, (b) certified human resources dedicated full-time to the work, (c) HMB specific strategy and theory of change. It also recommends: (a) Prepare a National Strategy for the HMB management and increase promotional and educational actions, (b) strengthen community participation and training and certification of human resources, (c) develop a statistical information system for the control, monitoring and comparability between territories and (c) guarantee the HMB technological maintenance.
- The evaluation of the project Strengthening of Protective Environments in Old Havana recommends to: (a) negotiate with the Municipal Health Directorate, the possibility of providing a first aid kit for the centres linked to the project where activities are carried out with children and adolescents and develop training on its use, (b) review, adapt and guarantee the use of communication products that include a possible referral route for physical or psychological care for children and adolescents who are identified as being at risk of violence, (c) promote the training of the team of adults involved in activities with children and adolescents on issues related to the prevention of violence and the referral route to the corresponding entities for treatment

The kit for adolescents for expression and innovation proved to be relevant in the Cuban context as a methodological resource that allows UNICEF to widen and strengthen the work with this age group. The kits have complemented the efforts of UNICEF and its counterparts for developing life skills, preventing all forms of violence that affect children and adolescents and providing psychosocial support. Additionally, they have contributed to articulating the work of various institutions complementing the efforts of counterparts and UNICEF programmatic areas, as well as becoming a gateway for new scenarios, including in emergency contexts.

The current update and review of the legal and normative frameworks (including policies for children and adolescents) offered the opportunity for UNICEF to provide technical support on children's rights and highlight the need to work towards an integrated child protection system. The UNICEF approach to child protection was recognized and appreciated by national authorities, civil society and the media and by other key stakeholders and the general population. The need to strengthen alliances with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and the Federation of Cuban Women was highlighted, as part of mapping key actors engaged in the protection of child and adolescent rights and well-being.

The alliances achieved with the technical teams of MINED have enabled the scaling up of many of the planned activities, while also guaranteeing their sustainability. The rapid scaling of infant care centres, to reach 60 by the end of 2022, was possible thanks to the close collaboration with the early childhood department and the commitment of the minister of education. Likewise, progress on strengthening the psychopedagogical teams at 54 vocational schools and the life skills training was achieved thanks to the collaboration and close coordination with the technical-professional teaching department. However, it is necessary to strengthen these alliances and replicate them with the special education department and the different levels of the MINED science and technology department, so as to attain greater and more effective results.

The programme has made good progress in changing the perceptions and negative attitudes towards children and adolescents with intellectual disability and autism who are included in regular education

and in vocational schools. However, in order to achieve better scalability and sustainability it is important to better measure and document results and strengthen the skills of counterparts in this area.

The hybrid modality for training and skills development (in person and online) and the use of multimedia platforms and WhatsApp groups proved to be efficient in advancing the implementation of the cooperation programme during COVID-19. However, it should be accompanied by a feasibility assessment to check accessibility and connectivity and by regular training on digital skills. The creation of multimedia classrooms aimed at building digital, transferable and job-specific skills in vocational schools, including DRR education, will guarantee effective online training and the use of open-source educational resources for education and community training.

The acquisition of essential medical supplies and medicines has been crucial for maintaining and strengthening the response capabilities of the NHS. Nearly 85 per cent of budget allocated to health was linked to emergency response, with a large component in medical supplies. UNICEF and MINSAP created a purchasing committee, with the participation of experts in the sector, which optimizes the procurement process, including the selection of supplies compatible with country infrastructure, available resources and execution times, facilitating internal coordination for the delivery of supplies meant to save lives. However, market limitations linked to sanctions and international logistics have been a substantial bottleneck and have delayed deliveries, greatly limiting the MINSAP's capacity to provide rapid emergency response.