

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Update on the context and situation of children

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the largest populations in Africa (estimates range from 98.3 million according to the DRC Bureau of Statistics and over 100 million according to other estimates) and poorest (73 % live in extreme poverty) and has been in a state of conflict and vulnerability for almost forty years.

DRC experienced its first peaceful transfer of power in 2019, after two years of political crisis and violence; however, the country remains vulnerable to drivers of fragility and violence.

Due to its abundant and diverse natural resources (e.g., with 70% of the world reserve for cobalt), a geographic strategic location bordering 9 countries, with a young and growing population, the DRC has considerable economic potential. The significant economic achievements, with a projected 6% economic growth over 2022, are expected to continue in 2023. However, this growth is mainly driven from the mining sector rather than domestic production, triggering a limited positive impact on populations. Children and adolescents are often used to work in the mining sector, which remains a major concern.

DRC is slowly recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economy has shown resilience despite the spillover of the war in Ukraine (higher food and fuel prices). However, with only seven years remaining to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), DRC is very unlikely to achieve any of the targets (source: National Observatory on Sustainable Development) and children's rights continue to be infringed.

Despite competing needs in this challenging context, efforts have been made to increase the share of the state budget for key social sectors necessary for child development and well-being. Notably, in 2022, the social sectors represented 29.8% of the total budget (including 16.7% for education, 10.3% for health and 2.7% for social protection). Looking forward to 2023, the DRC ambitiously increased the state budget to US\$16.1 billion with social sectors still accounting for 30.5% (including a slight increase for education).

Bold social and policy reforms, such as the Universal Health Coverage and Free Education are vital to allow the majority of children and adolescents to benefit from essential and basic social services and to break the cycle of poverty.

The DRC is facing one of the world's most complex and protracted crisis in the East. Around 15.4 million children are bearing the brunt of an escalation in armed conflict, and recurrent disease outbreaks, further exacerbating chronic poverty and systemic weaknesses.

DRC hosts the second-highest number of internally displaced people (IDP) in the world due to conflict and violence and the first in Africa, with over 5.6 million IDPs. A growing number of targeted attacks against civilian populations and infrastructures, including IDP sites, schools, and health facilities, have been reported, and severely impacting the provision of social services, thereby limiting humanitarian assistance to affected communities and especially children. In a context where displacement is a survival mechanism, displaced children and their families live in very precarious conditions exposing them to increased risks of abuse, exploitation, recruitment, and other forms of violence. The UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism documented close to 3,500 verified grave violations affecting close to 3,000 children; whereas 70% of victims of all grave violations are boys, girls represent 99% of those affected by sexual violence. Through partnership and coordination with MONUSCO and despite

funding and access constraints, 3,303 children were released from armed groups, mainly in the eastern part of the country.

With the recent deployment of the East African Community Joint Regional Force in eastern DRC, increased military operations are expected in 2023 alongside the elevation of tensions in the run-up to the presidential elections scheduled in December 2023, placing children at even higher risk.

The DRC is also prone to damage from growing levels of flooding, and a wide spectrum of epidemic outbreaks, including two new Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) outbreaks in Equateur and North Kivu, and a sharp increase of suspected measles cases (nearly 150,000 recorded cases – an increase of over 162% from 2022). Cholera remains a major health issue in the country with 18,507 suspected cases and 296 deaths notified (55% increase compared to the same period in 2021). South-Kivu, Tanganyika and North-Kivu are among the most affected provinces accounting for 76% of the total cholera cases in DRC. According to the 2022 UNICEF/USAID analysis of the nutritional situation there was a deterioration of the nutrition situation in children and women with 30% increase in nutrition crisis alerts.

Access to growing parts of the East is becoming increasingly impeded, providing challenges to ‘leaving no one behind’ in delivery of SDGs and to effectively prevent and respond to these multiple crises and challenges.

Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF and partners continued investing in a package of interventions supporting government programmes to achieve key results for children in immunization, nutrition, education, child protection and WASH.

Every child and adolescent survives and thrives, with access to nutritious diets, quality health care, nurturing practices, and essential supplies

In 2022, the impact of COVID-19 on the health sector still challenged the response to concurrent epidemic outbreaks (polio, Ebola, COVID-19, measles, cholera, yellow fever, MPox). UNICEF’s support was instrumental in closing four polio vaccine derived outbreaks and two Ebola virus outbreaks.

On maternal, newborn and child health, more than 400,000 diarrhoea cases (91% of reported cases) and half a million cases (95% of reported cases) in children less than 5 were successfully treated in more than 2,000 community care sites and health facilities.

Immunization

Although health administrative, data (DHIS2) shows an increasing trend between 2021 and 2022 (nearly 10 points) in diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccination, the “WHO and UNICEF estimates of immunization coverage” indicates that only 65% of children were vaccinated with this trivalent vaccine in 2021. This underlines an important discrepancy in data and its related challenges when it comes to identifying under-vaccinated children. The latter remains an issue of concern and includes 734,000 “zero dose children”.

COVID-19 uptake was slow in the beginning (less than 1% in December 2021) and to increase coverage, the Government formulated a plan to accelerate COVID-19 vaccination, targeting 53 million people. UNICEF in partnership with AVAT, WB, COVAX, procured and distributed 32 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine nationwide enabling a first dose in more than 9 million people and almost 7 million were fully vaccinated (12.5% of targeted population) including 22% of health workers. In

2023, UNICEF will continue supporting the Ministry of Health in integrating COVID-19 vaccination in routine immunization and prioritize vaccination of zero-dose and partially vaccinated children.

Building on 2021 advocacy and efforts to improve vaccine supply chain and procurement, the Minister of Finance signed the Vaccine Independent Initiative in early 2022, contributing to the timely and effective leverage of financial resources, with more than US\$9.4 million made available by the Government to procure 19 million doses of routine vaccines.

Prevention of stunting

Poor quality of children's diets is a main obstacle to survival, growth development and learning. In DRC, more than 15 million children under 5 live in severe and moderate food poverty. This means that they are not fed with at least 5 out of 8 food groups per day (vegetables, fruits, dairy, proteins, breastmilk) and therefore do not have access to the minimum acceptable diet and are at risk of malnutrition and stunting.

UNICEF is a main contributor to the result achieved in Vitamin A supplementation coverage, which reached 18,314,859 children (91% of target) compared to 9 million in 2021. Integrated management of acute malnutrition programme was also scaled up, with 459,894 children treated against severe acute malnutrition in 2022, more than 42,000 children than in 2021.

In 2023, in addition to continuing strengthening synergies between WASH, nutrition services for children and social safety nets, UNICEF will start working on food systems with other critical partners, such as FAO and WFP. This strategy will maximize overall results for children and improve their health, nutritional status and cognitive development.

Every child and adolescent learns and acquires skills for the future

With the disparities in learning and access particularly visible in girls' education, especially in the transition between primary and lower secondary school (1/4 of girls do not pass), strong emphasis was placed on promoting girls and young adolescents' formal and non-formal learning and education through strengthening linkages with other social sectors to address various factors preventing girls and young adolescents to access and achieve education and thrive.

Despite challenges of access and quality, education remains on the forefront of the national agenda. This was clearly showed by the political engagement taken by the President of the Republic during the Transforming Education Summit in New York in September 2022, to operationalize the 4-year Partnership Compact developed with the Government and key education stakeholders. This requires major reforms on i) teachers' workforce (career development, payroll, and pedagogical training); ii) improving learning and teaching conditions, including in crisis-affected areas (classrooms, access to WASH and protection services, remedial classes, and psychosocial support); and iii) systems strengthening (data, sector reviews, and coordination mechanisms).

In 2022, intersectoral interventions between education and protection strengthened the prevention of gender-based violence, in and out of schools. More than 11,000 teachers (3,428 women) benefitted from increased knowledge around Gender Based Violence in Schools and Gender Responsive Pedagogy to better respond to students needs and improve overall learning environment in schools.

Since the launch of the free education policy in 2019, lack of classrooms remains a major gap. UNICEF supported the construction of an additional 434 classrooms and WASH facilities providing 21,700 children (10,416 girls) and their teachers with a protective environment. Additionally, 191 schools have been upgraded with improved gender-sensitive WASH facilities (i.e. intimate showers in latrines) and benefiting 68,780 students (33,005 girls).

In a country where the number of out-of-school children remains high (approximately 4 million children aged 6 to 11 years), UNICEF continued to support the Government to expand and promote

access to learning opportunities. Alternative learning pathways for over 56,000 out-of-school children with skills for resilience and employability, were also part of UNICEF and partners (UNESCO and ILO) programming.

Access to education remains a challenge for children with disabilities and UNICEF is working with Handicap International and the Delegated Minister of People Living with Disabilities to integrate marginalized groups in schools towards a more inclusive education.

Every child and adolescent is protected from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect, and harmful practices

UNICEF's continuous collaboration with the Government and partners, notably through critical institutional capacity-building and evidence-based service delivery interventions led to the provision of essential child protection services to more than 500,000 children affected by violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect both in development and humanitarian settings.

Protection From Sexual Violence and Exploitation

Preventing and responding to violence against children through child protection systems and in an integrated manner is at the core of UNICEF's child protection interventions. UNICEF's strategic shift and focus on addressing the disproportionate child protection vulnerabilities faced by adolescent girls resulted in assisting with multi-sectoral services close to 22,000 children (including 14,000 girls) who directly experienced violence (exceeding by 40% the national planned target and contributing to the overall regional results).

To significantly extend the reach of child protection services and increase the number of vulnerable children provided with referrals, care, and services, UNICEF and its institutional partner (Division of Social Affairs) have scaled-up in large urban areas a community-based approach combining the deployment of trained para-social workers and the use of social contracts allowing children to access education, health, and social protection.

As started in 2021, the scale-up of gender-based violence interventions in emergencies continued to extend its reach, and affected populations in 12 out of the 26 provinces now have access to safe mechanisms to report and disclose sexual exploitation and abuse.

Birth Registration

UNICEF supported the government to scale-up the provision of birth registration services through a systematic interoperability between the civil registration and the health sectors building on its newly developed strategy on civil registration and legal identity. As a result, the total number of children registered significantly increased to more than 1.4 million children. Amongst these children, more than 180,000 were registered beyond the initial registration timeframe and were provided with a second chance to have an identity thanks to an increased collaboration between the civil registration, health, and education sectors.

To circumvent the delayed adoption of legislative reforms, UNICEF supported the introduction of an innovative inter-ministerial decree including Ministers of the Interior, Health and Digital Affairs (to be formally adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2023), which will be instrumental to significantly modernize and expand digitized civil registration services across the country.

In 2023, the child protection programme will continue to assist the most vulnerable children through prevention and care services with a specific focus on girls affected by violence, abuse, and exploitation.

Every child and adolescent has access to water, sanitation and hygiene and lives in a safe and sustainable climate and environment

In 2022, some 212 healthcare facilities, climate resilient WASH infrastructure, that meet the national WASH standards (equipped with solar energy for pumping and lighting purposes, safe disposal of medical, potable water, etc.) were rehabilitated to serve around 212,000 people including 108,120 women living in the surrounding communities. They also benefitted from the extension of the water supply network.

To bridge the gap between humanitarian and development programming, UNICEF supported the construction of the water network in the capital of the North Kivu province, Goma, which is now providing potable water to nearly 100,000 people (50,960 women) and was handed over to local authorities. This network has replaced emergency water supply facilities (reservoirs, water trucking). In response to the upsurge of violence in the North Kivu region, the water supply network will be further expanded in 2023 to benefit a further half a million people.

Every child and adolescent has access to inclusive social protection and lives free from poverty

To continue the joint inter-agency investments from 2021, the humanitarian cash transfer programme initiated with WFP to alleviate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on semi-urban vulnerable families in the outskirts of the capital, Kinshasa, has been a trigger to scaling-up to a social-safety net model, integrating a package of essential services for children in collaboration with MINAS. In 2022, 4,000 households were provided with unconditional cash transfers (UNICEF) and agricultural related income-generating activities (led by FAO), ensuring increased resilience and food security of households.

DRC is still far from reaching SDG1 on eradication of poverty as almost three quarter of the population still lives in extreme poverty, according to the National Observatory on Sustainable Development. To enable systemic change, UNICEF and partners will support the Government with the first-ever dialogue on social protection planned in February 2023, aimed at shaping the institutional framework for investments in social protection and policies.

Humanitarian Results

UNICEF and its partners continued to be among the first responders delivering a needs-based and integrated life-saving response reaching 3,447,503 people, including 2,702,485 children through humanitarian assistance, in alignment with the Core Commitments for Children. Notably, 1,267,852 million people accessed safe water, 1.5 million children under 5 were vaccinated against measles and 308,420 received treatment for severe wasting; 183,680 children and caregivers were provided with mental health and psychosocial support while 343,482 children continued learning.

UNICEF also supported DRC's preparedness effort in North Kivu and in Ituri for a timely detection and prevention of spread of the Ebola outbreak in Uganda mainly through the reactivation of nearly 300 Community Animation Cells. The 3,000 trained community members have been instrumental in working with local media and in disseminating good practices and awareness messages on preventing Ebola infection. UNICEF has also established infection prevention and control measures through sensitization and improvement of WASH infrastructures including "pre-triage zones" in 11 health facilities bordering Uganda.

Finally, through UNICEF's localized Rapid Response Mechanism (UniRR), nearly 710,000 internally displaced received essential supplies (cooking set, plastic sheeting, soap, jerry cans, blankets, etc.) contributing to an overall improvement of their precarious situation. Through UNICEF's cholera rapid response almost 1.2 million people were also reached contributing to contain the transmission of the epidemic. Community engagement and localization from the onset of the response, have proven to be change strategies paving the way for more resilient, cohesive and shock responsive populations.

Key Cross-Cutting Results

To maximize results for children, UNICEF strengthened community and grassroots level interventions, through 30,000 Community Animation Cells (CAC) with more than 350,000 community members provided with the required skills to disseminate the package of essential family practices such as hygiene practices, including living in open defecation free (ODF) environment/villages. More than 1,000 communities (over one million people) are now certified ODF. The children and families living in those village are now less at risk of morbidity and mortality associated with fecal-oral diseases, likewise the risk of malnutrition is reduced, and dignity of women and girls enhanced.

In alignment and following the UNICEF Gender Action Plan, UNICEF focused on research and evidence generation on the impact of gender determinants on women and girls' access to nutrition, WASH, and health services. The results have led to programme adjustments that boosted women and girls' access to essential services. For example, promising evidence shows better access to antenatal care services in areas where gender has been better integrated into programmes.

Within the humanitarian country team, UNICEF was also a major contributor to systematically and meaningfully mainstream gender in humanitarian programming, resulting in the accrued role and participation of women-led organizations in responding to humanitarian crises.

Moreover, progress was also made in mitigating GBV risks and a total of 18,886 women received dignity and menstrual hygiene management kits in three provinces resulting from the established Gender, GBV and PSEA mechanism that ensured integration and mainstreaming of these critical gender-sensitive components in the delivery of services.

Management Priority Results

As outlined in the Annual Management Plan for priorities focused on value for money, fraud prevention, including reinforcing ethical conduct within the workforce and PSEA. An internal audit conducted by the UNICEF Office for Internal Audit and Investigation in February 2022 resulted in reviewing and strengthening key systems for managing risks and risk-informed programming. Additionally, fraud prevention measures and awareness amongst staff, suppliers and contractors was also reinforced.

Value for money

The overall value of supplies procured was over US\$271million, comprising US\$251million of goods, such as medical, hygiene kits, water pumps, ready to use therapeutic foods, vaccines, etc., and US\$20 million for contractual services to support UNICEF logistics and operations. This represents a 25% increase from 2021 and more effective procurement planning and logistics resulted in an annual saving of around US\$3 million.

Fraud prevention

Over 200 implementing partners including (national and international NGOs) and 100 suppliers participated in online and live sessions on preventing and reporting fraud allegations. Fraud awareness and reporting of fraud allegations were also done through the U-Report platform, given its large reach and as an innovation.

Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)

To increase awareness on UNICEF's policy of zero tolerance of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), all newly UNICEF hired staff are required to systematically sign the PSEA Code of Conduct, undertake a mandatory online course, and attend face to face induction. This also includes information

on ethics, ethical conduct, and integrity, amongst other UNICEF's core values. To strengthen fact-finding and data sharing, UNICEF contributed to establish the first-ever pool of 48 SEA investigators. Around 1.7 million people received information on acts that constitute SEA and how to report them, while more than 1 million accessed safe mechanisms for reporting allegations. UNICEF as provider of last resort for children, supported alleged child victims of SEA and children born from SEA.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

In 2022, UNICEF DRC mobilized US\$408 million to address critical children's needs through development and humanitarian interventions, with US\$204.9 million in development and US\$137 million in humanitarian funding. The top five overall donors to UNICEF DRC were the World Bank, USAID, GAVI, CERF and Germany, with SIDA being the top donor for flexible funding.

In 2022, funding through these partnerships (World Bank, USAID and GAVI) allowed UNICEF to significantly contribute to supporting the Government with the COVID-19 response, through the purchase of vaccines, the strengthening of the cold chain and the rollout of the national vaccination programme.

Throughout 2022, UNICEF continued to strengthen its strategic partnerships with UN sister agencies, notably WHO, WFP, FAO, UNFPA, UNHCR, IOM, UNESCO, UNOPS, UNDP and the Resident Coordinator's office to influence national and humanitarian agenda around children's rights, and with MONUSCO on monitoring grave violations.

For the first time, UNICEF also accessed resources from the Peacebuilding Fund as a part of a joint programme with UNHCR and FAO, focusing on equitable access to socio-economic and natural resources in the Tanganyika province. These interventions will contribute to sustainable solutions for peaceful cohabitation between communities in the context of the UN Peacekeeping Force's withdrawal.

Building on previous results on PSEA, UNICEF is collaborating with UNFPA and Danish Refugee Council to reinforce coordination and accelerate results aimed at preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse. To cite some of the major results, this partnership allowed communities and victims to benefit from: i) better quality community-based complaint mechanisms to report alleged cases of exploitation and abuse and safe reporting channels for over 100,000 people; and ii) timely and effective services and assistance (health, psychosocial, etc.).

In addition, engagement with Government was also enhanced through the close partnership between the Ministry of Health (General Directorate for Epidemics) UNICEF and other key partners (WHO, CDC, Epicentre, Bluesquare and Resolve to Save Lives) on establishing the Integrated Outbreak Analytics capacities within the Ministry to better understand the dynamics around epidemics (measles, polio, and cholera) with a view to adapting and contextualizing responses. This includes gender and age specific analysis.

Leveraging on private partnerships for digital technologies for children and the within the framework of a regional private sector partnership UNICEF with Airtel, DRC launched digital learning in schools. In 2022, 20 secondary schools in Haut Katanga and Kinshasa provinces were connected allowing 5,000 students (57% girls) to access national learning platforms. This is a drop in the ocean, in a country of the magnitude of DRC counting more than 100,000 schools; digital learning modality is a "must have" to equip the 26 million students with the 21st century skills needed to meaningfully contribute to the development of the nation.

In terms of lessons learned and innovations, “cash plus for children” and “adolescent girls’ agency and empowerment” have been amongst those interventions that UNICEF DRC will scale in 2023 considering their impactful results on children and adolescents.

"Cash+ for children"

According to UNICEF’s Office of Research, Innocenti, evidence shows that cash transfers help the poorest and most vulnerable families meet their basic needs and generate a wide range of benefits such as increased household productive capacity, improved dietary diversity, and school attendance.

In 2022, UNICEF enhanced its internal capacity for managing cash-based interventions and rolled out 2 humanitarian cash programmes assisting 5,100 households (25,080 beneficiaries) with mobile money transfers in Tanganyika province. The first intervention was carried out in the health zone of Manono where UNICEF assisted 1,400 households through a Cash+ Nutrition program complementing malnutrition treatment with multipurpose cash transfers to avoid children relapsing back to malnutrition and improve households’ purchasing power and access to a healthy and nutritious diet. According to initial Post-Distribution Monitoring feedback provided by Third Party Monitoring partners, 90% of beneficiary households reported an increased number of meals for family members during the intervention and the malnutrition treatment cure rate reached 98%.

The second intervention took place in another health zone, Mbulula, always in the same province. A total of 3,606 amongst the most vulnerable displaced population and host community households received multi-purpose cash through mobile money transfers to improve access to basic goods and services. As per the mid-term intervention analysis, 91% of households reported an increase in expenditure for children and 96% reported improvement in their overall conditions.

A more detailed evaluation of these promising results is expected in 2023. This will feed into the scale-up of this “Cash+ nutrition” programme with a wider geographical coverage and linkages with social protection schemes to transition from malnutrition treatment to prevention interventions for children. UNICEF will expand this approach to other sectors in 2023, such as protection and health to maximize investments for the most vulnerable children.

Adolescent girls’ agency and empowerment

In November 2022, the first-ever DRC’s Girls Forum, brought together in Kinshasa 100 adolescent girls and young women from across DRC and other 12 African countries.

More than a simple event, led under the slogan: *I am here to be heard*, the Forum was a unique moment of dialogue allowing the girls to speak freely, most for the first time, about the challenging situations they face daily, in their community, in their home and in their school. Sexual abuse was the most recurrent topic raised. Moving testimonies confirmed that sexual and gender-based violence is still used in DRC as a weapon of war and transactional and survival sex is common practice in humanitarian settings to meet basic needs.

In addition to quality exchanges, the Forum was the platform for launching the premiere of the "Vaillante" in the DRC, a television and film production by UNICEF on child marriage to spark dialogue and build another narrative around child marriage in Africa.

The Forum was also the springboard for the launch of U-Report girls, a world first. Through a simple click via SMS, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, this platform allows girls to make their voices heard on the issues that particularly affect them and access information on women's issues, to help them make good decisions and ultimately act as champions for girls' rights in their communities. The launch of U-Report Girls is already having a fallout. In only a few weeks after its launch, the participation of girls on the platform rose from 33% to 36%, out of a total of more than 4.6 million

registered U-Report users.

The first U-Report Girls survey, selected by the girls themselves and launched in December 2022 with more than 69,000 participants was indeed on sexual violence. The platform and the survey results are also used by the Ministries of Youth and Sports amongst others, to inform policies, actions such as youth focus social services.