

## South Asia

### Update on the context and trends

South Asia region (SAR) is home to over 625 million children, accounting for slightly over a quarter of the world's child population. Progress was noted in several children related outcomes prior to 2020 such as accelerated economic growth and reduction in poverty. For example, the number of people living in extreme poverty was reduced from 500 to 156 million between 2007 and 2019, despite growing population[1]. However, these gains were upended by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In sharp contrast with pre-COVID economic growth projections, all economies in the region posted negative growth rates in 2020, except for Bangladesh, where growth slowed sharply[2]. Public external debt increased in at least half of the SAR countries resulting in increased proportions of the revenue used for debt servicing.

The region faces a polycrisis with multiple, complex, diverse, concurrent crises, public health emergencies, climate change-induced natural disasters and economic crises that pushed the most vulnerable beyond humanitarian thresholds. In the past two decades, more than half of all South Asians, or 750 million people, have been affected by at least one climate-related disaster such as flooding, drought, or cyclones[3]. While South Asia accounts for only 8 per cent of global carbon emissions[4], the region is one of the hardest hit. Climate change is predicted to displace 62 million South Asians by 2050[5]. The UNICEF Children's Climate Risk Index indicates that every child in South Asia is at risk from at least one climate or environmental hazard, shock or stress. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan since the August 2021 transition of power resulted in almost universal poverty levels. Pakistan was affected by a major flood disaster in 2022, which left millions of vulnerable populations displaced. Sri Lanka was affected by an economic crisis, which rapidly led to shortages of fuel, essential drugs and food.

Climate-related shocks, economic crises, and the lingering effects of COVID-19 pushed already vulnerable children in the region into unprecedented food and nutrition vulnerability. South Asia carries half of the global malnutrition burden as half of all children with wasting live in the SAR. Few countries in South Asia are on track to meet any of the SDG nutrition targets. The latest available data shows that only three countries are on course to reduce the prevalence of childhood stunting, whilst four countries are showing no progress of wasting or are worsening.

SAR continues to deal with a learning crisis characterised by poor learning outcomes where half of 10-year-olds in middle- and low-income countries are unable to understand a simple written sentence and more than 93 million children in the region are out of school. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities, particularly for the most marginalized children.

COVID-19 induced morbidity and mortality reduced in 2022 partly due to the high COVID-19 vaccination rates in the region. SAR saw a steady improvement in immunization rates over the past decades, reaching 90 per cent for DTP3 in 2019 but in 2021, it dropped to 85 per cent leaving 5 million out of the 34 million children from the region not or incompletely vaccinated. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected the region and set it back almost a decade in terms of immunization. The number of children who have never received a single dose of vaccine against DTP grew from 2.4 million in 2019 to 3.8 million in 2021. South Asia has the second highest burden of zero-dose children in the world, accounting for 1 in 5 (21%) of the global caseload. The majority of these children live in Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. Zero-dose children are mainly found among urban poor, remote rural, migrant and tribal populations, and tend to live in households that face multiple deprivations. Wild polio remains endemic in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Great strides have been made to increase the proportion of populations with access to basic drinking water services and it is projected that 95 per cent of SAR's population will benefit from these services by 2030. At

current trends only 63 per cent of the population is estimated to have safely managed sanitation services by 2030.

Gender inequalities, perpetuated by social norms, caste, class, religion, ethnicity and location, hinder achievement of development goals. In South Asia, more than 37 per cent of women have experienced violence at the hands of their intimate partner[6]. Adolescent girls' advancement in education, health and protection is hindered by existing gender inequalities. Child marriage has been on a decline yet 1 in 4 women (20-24 years) were married before their 18th birthday. Some SAR countries continue to record low birth registration rates with an estimated 77 million children with no legal identity[7].

The year 2022 marked the first year of implementing the four-year Regional Office Management Plan (ROMP) which is aligned to the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and other global programme related plans. The ROMP has been operationalised by the Annual Management Plan and work plans identified eight Areas for Acceleration. These are achieving results for marginalised adolescent girls, bridging the digital divide, improving adolescent skills and employability, improving mental health for adolescents and caregivers, climate change, reducing severe acute malnutrition and stunting, increasing private sector fundraising and supporting a dynamic and motivated workforce.

[1] United Nations Children's Fund, 2023. Responding Today for Tomorrow: South Asia

[2] *ibid*

[3] <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/south-asia-regional-integration/climate-change>

[4] <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SAS/south-asia/carbon-co2-emissions>

[5] <https://actionaid.org/news/2020/climate-migration-south-asia-set-treble-2050-due-political-inaction-global-warming#:~:text=More%20than%2062%20million%20South,Climate%20Action%20Network%20South%20Asia>

[6] Accelerated action needed to end child marriage in Bangladesh by 2030

[7] <https://www.unescap.org/blog/collaborating-across-south-asia-improve-civil-registration>

## Major contributions and drivers of results

### Every child survives and thrives

The Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) supported essential service continuity as COVID-19 infection rates declined across the region. ROSA ensured the COVID-19 response, coordination, and collaboration internally and externally to increase vaccine demand, expand cold chain capacities, and coordinate donor support. The eight SAR countries cumulatively administered 2.9 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines, translating into 84 per cent of the target population – 68 per cent of the total population – being fully vaccinated against COVID-19. The Regional Office supported countries in their efforts to catch-up unvaccinated children that were lost during the pandemic and to curb dropping immunization coverage rates. Technical inputs were provided to county plans to reduce the number of zero-dose children. As part of the emergency response, technical assistance was provided to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka on the resumption of health service delivery and PHC. ROSA provided technical support to the development and implementation of Every Newborn Action Plans (ENAP) and Ending Preventable Maternal Mortality (EPMM) country planning initiative and extended technical support to all country teams in the region on national ENAP monitoring and reporting through the revised global ENAP monitoring platform.

To mark World Breastfeeding Week, ROSA jointly organized a high-level advocacy event on maternal and newborn health and nutrition in collaboration with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the South Asian Federation of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (SAFOG). ROSA and SAFOG deepened their regional partnership with a Memorandum of Understanding on joint support to maternal and newborn mortality reduction and nutrition programmes in South Asia. ROSA developed 'Nourishing South Asia @2030 framework for accelerating action' to galvanize and accelerate regional action. Technical advice and advocacy support was provided to mitigate impacts of humanitarian crises on nutrition in children in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. A regional workshop on bottleneck analysis of legal measures, monitoring and enforcement systems to protect breastfeeding in South Asia was organised to enhance country capacities. Thought

leadership for nutrition in the region was strengthened including the conduct of several regional analyses and reviews as well as leveraging the power of evidence, data and knowledge as a key enabler of nutrition results for children and women.

### **Every child learns**

In the context of a post-COVID-19 response, evidence documenting substantial learning loss was generated as well as an observed increase in out-of-school children (OOSC). Climate change-induced disasters affected education and skills for millions of children. In response, ROSA supported countries with learning recovery; early childhood development; scaling-up digital learning, skills and employability of young people; and developed evidence on the return on investment for OOSC in Pakistan. ROSA contributed to several publications by Country Office (COs), Headquarters and partners, including the Foundational Learning Mapping Report; Pulse Check and Vitals of Digital Learning; and Online Safety Report. Guidance was also provided in relation to programming for children with disabilities.

On skills and employability, ROSA developed a situational analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on skilling efforts in South Asia, the regional mapping of skilling initiatives, and the development of the signature programme initiative, which defines ROSA's value proposition in the sector. ROSA also supported the significant scale-up of results in four countries in 2022. Within less than 18 months Bhutan, India, and Maldives went from inception to full integration of the Adolescent Skills and Employability-Generation system which strengthens efforts to mainstream employable skills and an entrepreneurial mindset into government efforts. All eight countries were supported with targeted strategies to promote equitable, inclusive and flexible pathways for education and skills, including humanitarian and fragile contexts, for adolescents, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized that are neither in education, employment nor training (NEET).

ROSA led the development of the *Heat is On!* report series which examined direct and indirect impacts of climate change on the education systems. These are the first reports of their kind and represent a shift in the approach on how the education sector had been analysed with respect to climate change risks, moving from focusing only on climate impacts on schools/infrastructure and on students' attendance, to develop a systemic approach to analyse the fundamental role that education systems have to play in the climate change agenda, providing diverse entry points and recommendations.

### **Every child is protected from violence and exploitation**

Preparedness and response to child protection in humanitarian situations were strengthened through capacity building, quality review of preparedness and response plans, and in-country support missions. ROSA's in-country support helped four countries prevent and respond to gender-based violence. Strengthening the capacity for investigations to respond to sexual exploitation and abuse was achieved through identification of long-term agreements with three service providers for training, coaching and investigation support. ROSA provided technical support to the regional programmes on child marriage and labour which have reached over one million children with protection services.

ROSA maintained a regional network through the South Asia Coordination Group for ending violence against children while leading its child marriage thematic working group. Regional partnerships to promote universal access to birth registration were strengthened through participation in the Regional Steering Committee for the CRVS Decade of Action under the leadership of UNESCAP. A mapping of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) interventions and a multi-sectoral MHPSS capacity strengthening strategy was developed. Deep dive MHPSS sessions were provided to the CO child protection in emergencies focal points and in-country support provided to three countries. ROSA's support resulted in the development of investment cases and mobilisation of resources for the WHO-UNICEF MHPSS joint programme in Bhutan and Maldives.

Advocacy and programming at the regional and country levels was informed by evidence and knowledge management. Two regional briefs on children on the move and child labour and disability were published. A study on economic burden of violence against children was completed while the mapping of justice for children

workforce and the regional child marriage profile will be available in early 2023. Evidence, guidance and tools were made accessible to the COs through e-bulletins and an evidence series related to child protection, child marriage and children with disabilities.

### **Every child lives in a safe and clean environment**

Substantial progress has been made in reducing open defecation and improving safely managed sanitation facilities in both rural and urban environments and significant support was provided to strengthen WASH and infection prevention and control in schools. All SAR countries undertook comprehensive water scarcity assessments and ROSA focused on climate-resilient water services with attention to sustainability, water scarcity and security issues, and continuity of services. Attention continued to be given to hand hygiene with many countries developing Hand Hygiene Roadmaps incorporating hand hygiene in WASH implementation plans. All SAR country offices engaged in child-sensitive programmes to address climate change, disaster risks and environmental degradation, including youth engagement and advocacy for climate action, urban environmental management initiatives, disaster risk reduction, renewable energy, and clean air solutions.

With ROSA support Bangladesh developed a climate rationale for WASH services based on a comprehensive risk analysis and Bangladesh, India and Pakistan developed child-sensitive national and localized plans for climate change and/or environmental degradation. Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan engaged children, adolescents, young people in action and advocacy to address climate change, unsustainable energy use, and/or environmental degradation with ROSA support. This included engagement in the COP27 preparation process and influence on government contributions and policies.

### **Every child has an equitable chance in life**

ROSA strengthened and supported COs to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, price inflation and climate shocks as well as monitoring the macro fiscal implication of the compounding crises and deliver on planned interventions. ROSA supported COs to align Country Programmes with the UNICEF Strategic Plan and regional priorities. Support was also provided to strengthen CO programming on inclusive social protection, cash in emergencies, and public finance for children. This was achieved through providing ongoing technical assistance, evidence generation, knowledge management and capacity development. Partnerships have been progressively strengthened with ESCAP, ADB, ILO, World Bank, SAARC, and national thinktanks.

### **Changes strategies, enablers and cross cutting areas**

The results described in this report were achieved through the use of a combination of implementation strategies and enablers. Six management meetings were held to review RO and COs performance and improve oversight. UNICEF is committed to playing an active role in moving the UN reform agenda forward. The Business Operations Strategy quality assurance review was conducted and ROSA played a critical role in guiding and following up with the COs. Pakistan was selected to be among the first 10 countries to move to a Local Shared Service Centre (LSSC) and the process will start in early 2023. A resource mobilization strategy was developed to guide fundraising efforts and initiatives are being pursued to diversify the regional financial resource base. These include initiatives to improve partnerships with International Financial Institutions, NatComs and the public sector. Those efforts have resulted in the mobilization of about \$1 billion for the region.

The UNICEF workforce in SAR expanded by 13 per cent in 2022 due in large part to the emergency responses in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka as well as implementation of new Country Programme Documents in Bangladesh and India. Capacities and skills of employees have been enhanced through a number of regional initiatives such as the SAR M5S Suite (Mentorship, Surge, Shadow, Stretch, Strength-based Coaching, Staff Exchange), global training courses facilitated by ROSA, and CO learning activities. The working environment across the region has generally become more conducive as reflected by the improved results of the pulse survey. Staff motivation, connection and wellbeing have also improved.

The Security Section provided security advice, technical support and oversight in a changing security environment across the region. Input to and liaison with UNDSS and UN AFPs regionally and at the country level helped UNICEF to deliver its mandate, particularly in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, where implementation was challenged due to the evolving security, economic and geopolitical situations. There was a concerted effort to build in-country security capacity after the secondary impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Country Office staff programme planning and monitoring capacities were strengthened to enhance excellence and adherence to corporate guidelines and tools. Technical support for the development and approval of new Country Programmes was provided to India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The independent regional quality assessment of donor reporting of the eight COs was successfully completed, recording an increase from 74 per cent in 2020 to 76 per cent in 2022 for the regional average score. Technical support was provided to COs towards strengthening national systems that collect and analyse data on children. The Afghanistan CO was supported to design and implement the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS). Capacity to implement the MICS was further enhanced for SAR countries through the development of a MICS e-learning course in Agora. Momentum was also built for the generation and use of child related SDG indicators and a SAR data portal is being developed which will enhance data availability and visualisation.

The Evaluation, Impact and Learning Section has made considerable advances in producing and disseminating quality evaluative evidence in the region. In 2022, the section supported the implementation of 20 evaluations and continued to ensure use of the evaluative evidence through tracking of management responses. Country Programme Evaluations for Bhutan and Nepal were completed and technical support was provided towards the development of costed evaluation plans for India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. All eight Cos and the RO were supported to develop management responses for the 28 evaluative activities completed in 2022. In addition, the section substantially enhanced internal and external capacity on evaluation in all eight countries through its active evaluation network, technical support to COs, quality assurance, learning webinars and trainings.

The Communications and Advocacy Section navigated large-scale crises including the Pakistan flood and Sri Lanka economic crisis achieving twice the share of voice of other comparable agencies. Furthermore, ROSA carved out a bold regional voice on the climate crisis. Digital growth goals were met and exceeded as ROSA became the global leader in digital engagement across UNICEF COs and ROs thanks to an audience-and-story-first digital influence strategy designed to build brand affinity and trust.

ROSA technically supported the eight COs to strengthen Social Behaviour Change (SBC) leadership and as well as functions and partnership building integrating SBC in and across sectors. ROSA raised about \$13 million to support the implementation of quality SBC interventions and technical support was provided on community engagement, accountability to affected populations and behavioural science. Strategic partnerships with religious leaders translated into a faith engagement strategy around key sensitive issues in the region.

ROSA supported the eight COs in strategizing, planning and initiating emergency preparedness and response. Critical support was provided to responded to complex emergencies in Afghanistan and Bangladesh, climate change induced natural disasters in Bangladesh and Pakistan, and the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Capacity strengthening was revamped as emergency preparedness and response training modules aligned to the revised Core Commitments for Children (CCCs) were finalized and piloted in India and Pakistan.

The adolescent girl agenda was prioritized as a key accelerator for transformative programming. The regional framework for programming with and for adolescent girls was finalized to guide interventions for adolescent girls in South Asia. Technical guidance to COs was provided on how to apply a gender lens to programming for transformative results across various Strategic Plan Goal Areas and in emergency settings. The ROSA leadership on the adolescent girl agenda was amplified by the Regional International Day of the Girl 2022 which included significant participation from high-level policy makers and adolescent change agents.

ROSA further provided support to COs to strengthen adolescent programming. Four pieces of evidence highlighting the centrality of adolescent inspired solutions in child protection, social protection and

WASH/climate were completed. Focus shifted from conventional paradigms of instrumentalist participation and empowerment to rights-based institutionalized forms of participation informed by some of the most evolved empowerment and participation practices by UNICEF COs. The content for the massive open online course *ASPIRE! Leadership for Planning and Decision-Making with Adolescents* was developed which will support knowledge and competencies in relation to implementing rights-based, accountable and participatory adolescent programming.

ROSA continued to take strong steps towards bridging the digital divide associated with gender, urban, rural and household economic status. ROSA supported the implementation and upscaling of five digital innovations including Digital CRVS for Nepal; UNiSolve – digital UPSHIFT for Adolescent skills and employability – in Bhutan, India and Maldives; Internet of Good Things at the regional level and in Afghanistan; MHPSS support and services for children and adolescents in Nepal; and Scaling Pneumonia Response Innovations (SPRINT) in Pakistan. ICT4D solutions were developed and rolled out in emergency responses and ICT4D contributed to evidence-based decision making by developing dashboards for effective vaccine management and immunization cold chain. Support was provided to scale up real time monitoring initiatives (RapidPro, ONA-ODK and U-Report) in COs and ICT4D initiated collaboration with Mobile Network Operators for possible future engagement. Support was provided towards the automation of business processes for improved efficiencies.

## Lessons Learned and Innovations

The crises in SAR revealed the need to expand the understanding of market-based food system solutions and legal measures as well as strengthen emergency nutrition preparedness in addition to rapidly scale-up response capacities and enhance regional collaboration. The nutrition landscape is changing and the evolving nature of child malnutrition demands a multifaceted response including the need for new thinking and new strategic partnerships. An innovation in building local institutional capacity for nutrition included the identification of reputable in-country academic institutes to serve as nutrition national centres of excellence. A select few are being nurtured and networked to play a larger role for south-south collaboration and building a South Asia academic network to provide policy support throughout the region.

The sudden developments in Pakistan (floods) and Sri Lanka (economic crisis) demonstrated the need for enhanced cross-sectoral analysis at both inter- and intra-agency levels to improve early warning and support information-led decision-making. In addition, the simultaneous and massive ongoing emergencies in various countries highlighted the need for continued collaboration between the emergency and programme sections to ensure prioritisation of emergency preparedness and response is built into section workplans.

In the area of health, the approaches of zero-dose catch-ups, enhancing out-reach, integrated campaigns with focus on underserved and unreached children helped move toward the recovery of routine immunization and health systems. Understanding of community perceptions and the evidence-based, targeted interventions enhanced access to missed children and communities.

The need for tangible programming beyond youth engagement is clear as is the need to develop a stronger narrative of UNICEF as a credible partner in climate and environment. As such ROSA defined four strategic pillars for programming in climate, environment and energy namely: air quality; renewable energy; urban environmental degradation and waste management; and innovative financing mechanisms for disaster risk reduction, preparedness and response. A review of climate-resilient WASH activities revealed that the narrative around climate-resilient WASH demands more clarity with a need for stronger communication of what is different from conventional WASH programmes and services. The shift to climate-resilient WASH programming has had positive results, particularly with the use of renewable energy for low carbon sustainable operation of WASH facilities and services.

There is mounting evidence of the long-term impact of COVID-19 and humanitarian disasters on the increased rates of child marriage and child labour including the fact that significant numbers of children especially girls are

not returning to school; given the long-term economic impact on households such as increased debt and unemployment. The need for intersectoral collaboration is even more critical in order to accelerate results including for MHPSS, online protection, child marriage and child labour in both development and humanitarian contexts. The approaches of zero-dose catch-ups to “reach the unreached” in addition to enhancing outreach and integrated campaigns with a focus on the underserved populations has contributed tremendously towards the recovery of routine immunization in the region.

Emergencies and climate-induced disasters in 2022 highlighted the need for ever closer alignment of communication, advocacy and fundraising efforts in collaboration with programme sections and headquarters; and have shown that emergencies remain significant opportunities to build brand trust and affinity for longer term influence and income opportunities, including through the SAR Income Hub. Furthermore, meaningful stories that are driven by in-depth knowledge of our digital communities' expectations, needs and priorities ("right content at the right time") and are aligned to organizational goals is critical for UNICEF to carve out its niche in an increasingly saturated, fast-moving and disruptive digital landscape, ultimately solidifying our position as the go-to organization for children and youth. There is also the clear importance of linking children's needs to wider priorities and narrative within the region. Working through national thinktanks to create spaces for thought leaders to discuss children's needs is one way to address this need. ROSA has promoted the space for national dialogue convening high-level researchers and experts from key think-tanks to discuss the implication of COVID-19 and the economic crisis on children in the region.

ROSA will continue to provide technical leadership, oversight and quality assurance support to COs and continue to promote the centrality of children's rights to adopt innovative programmatic approaches and cross-cutting strategies. Emerging areas will receive more focus such as climate action, digital transformation, zero-dose children, parenting and learning loss recovery, all to close the gaps for households at risk of being left behind.