

Kyrgyzstan

Update on the context and situation of children

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic and political instability continued to impact the socio-economic situation and well-being of children. After a sharp decline in gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020 as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kyrgyzstan's economy slowly recovered in 2021 with GDP reaching 2.3 per cent growth,[1] as projected by the World Bank.

Overall prices for stable food items increased by 18 per cent, including meat, vegetables, milk and dairy products, in 2021 compared to 2020.[2] Inevitably, as the latest available data indicates, the national poverty rate increased to 25.3 per cent in 2020 compared with 20.1 per cent in 2019. Child poverty grew from 25.7 per cent in 2019 to an alarming 31.8 per cent in 2020.[3]

2021 ushered in major shifts in the political system of Kyrgyzstan. Sadyr Japarov, who came to power as a result of the October 2020 revolution, won the presidential elections in January 2021 with 80 per cent of the vote. Following a constitutional referendum in April 2021, Kyrgyzstan moved from a parliamentary to a presidential regime, consolidating presidential powers over the executive, judiciary and legislative branches. These shifts also prompted a comprehensive review of more than 359 laws to align them with the new Constitution.

In the parliamentary elections in November, candidates competed for 90 seats with reduced decision-making powers as set out in the new Constitution. The new Parliament has convened, elected the Speaker and identified eight new parliamentary committees.

The political transition spurred multiple changes and restructuring within the Government. The Government composition changed four times within a year. Several ministries were merged in an effort to optimize resources, only for some to be separated again at the end of the year. Much institutional capacity and resource was lost in the process. During the last quarter of the year, the President's Administration and Cabinet of Ministers were merged. It was announced that 30 per cent of civil service jobs were expected to be cut bringing additional uncertainties affecting decision-making processes and long-term planning.

The new constitution established the new position of Commissioner for Child Rights reporting directly to the President. The commissioner is tasked with monitoring and protecting child rights. This new commissioner role will be an important avenue for child rights advocacy and monitoring in Kyrgyzstan.

In April 2021, cross-border tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan escalated into a violent conflict in the Batken region. As a result, 36 people died and over 156 people were injured, including children. 136 houses and 84 facilities were destroyed throughout the region. More than 52,000 people were displaced in the first days of the conflict. The UN Disaster Response Coordination Unit (DRCU) was activated to respond to this humanitarian crisis. Between May and November, US\$3.4 million was mobilized by DRCU members to meet humanitarian needs including provision of shelters and non-food items, early recovery, education, WASH, food security, health and protection.

The new Government of Kyrgyzstan developed a new mid-term National Development Programme (NDP) for 2021–2026 alongside implementation and monitoring plans. The programme is broadly aligned with the National Development Strategy 2040. A reduction of monetary child poverty from 31.8 per cent in 2021 to 25 per cent by 2026 has become one of the key targets of the NDP.

As a result of joint efforts of the Kyrgyz government with development partners, six types of COVID-19 vaccines – four WHO-approved – became available to people above the age of 18, including through the COVAX mechanism, a worldwide initiative aimed at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. Despite vaccine availability, vaccination uptake is low. According to latest data, as of 24 January 2022, 16.2 per cent of population is vaccinated against COVID-19.[4]

Children continued to study both online and offline, depending on the epidemiological situation in their locality. Initially, priority for offline education was given to primary school students (Grades 1–5) and to Grades 9 and 11. The start of the 2021–2022 academic year was postponed by two weeks due to the pandemic. However, schools then opened for students of all grades.

A household survey conducted in October to assess the COVID-19 impact on children in Kyrgyzstan showed that 93 per cent of children were covered by distance learning, but only 84 per cent had sufficient conditions to learn remotely. The survey also indicated that more than 1 in 5 children was engaged in some form of child labour.[5]

A study, commissioned by UNICEF in 2021, showed that children with disabilities face significant difficulties to access affordable health and education services, are often discriminated against and subject to negative attitudes. In addition, they are often separated from the family and reside in an institution. These findings clearly demonstrate that children with disabilities remain among the most vulnerable in Kyrgyzstan. Trying to quantify the number of children with disabilities is a challenge due to lack of reliable data. A total of 32,000 children with disabilities are registered for the monthly social benefit while a national survey conducted in 2018 estimated that 8.7 per cent of children aged 5-17 years have a functional difficulty.[6]

Air pollution is a major concern from health, environmental, social and political perspectives. Bishkek continued to record worryingly poor air quality in 2021 with PM2.5 concentrations more than seven times the WHO annual average guideline and nearly twenty times the WHO 24-hour average guideline.[7] A key contributor to air pollution is believed to be the widespread use of coal for heating, especially during the winter. Low levels of water at Toktogul, the main hydroelectric and irrigation dam, prompted concerns about electricity shortages over the winter and drought during the summer. The reform of the energy sector is critical for sustainability of energy sources and solving the air pollution problem.

[1] <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kyrgyzrepublic/overview#1>

[2] 2021 Consumer Price Index.

[3] National Statistics Committee (NSC). June 2021

[4] WHO. Kyrgyzstan COVID-19 Weekly Situation Report. 24 January 2022

[5] NSC-UNICEF. Survey *COVID-19 impact on children and women in Kyrgyzstan*. October 2021

[6] UNICEF. Situation Analysis: Children and Adolescents with Disabilities in Kyrgyzstan. 2021

[7] www.airnow.gov

Major contributions and drivers of results

In 2021, UNICEF continued to support the Government in responding to the health and socio-economic consequences of COVID-19. Building on the lessons learned in 2020, the government improved its preparedness and response to the evolving pandemic. UNICEF's support for COVID-19 preparedness, response and recovery was integrated into ongoing programmes, shifting primarily to COVID-19 vaccination provision and communication efforts.

Recognizing the significance of political and governance shifts in the country, UNICEF worked

closely with the new Government to ensure that legislative and policy guarantees for children previously adopted were not lost in transition, and that the new national programme responds to the evolving needs of children.

UNICEF Kyrgyzstan programme delivery in 2021 amounted to US\$8 million, including US\$1.8 million in regular resources, US\$4.4 million in additionally mobilized resources and US\$1.8 million in emergency funding. The Osh Zone Office continued to be a critical asset for close monitoring of the situation of children and programme delivery in the southern regions.

The following section summarizes UNICEF Kyrgyzstan's key achievements in priority sectors and cross-cutting areas against the Country Programme and 2021 Annual Management Plan. The achievements are grouped around UNICEF's Strategic Plan Goal Areas.

Goal Area 1: Every child survives and thrives

In the health sector, service delivery was jeopardized by the merger of primary health care (PHC) with tertiary and secondary hospitals. To understand the changing structure of PHC in the country, UNICEF initiated a PHC landscape analysis to provide an overview of current service provision and areas for improvement, focusing on removing barriers to access and budgetary inefficiencies. In consultation with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank, UNICEF identified the need to analyse out-of-pocket payments that hinder access to comprehensive PHC by low-income families.

As a key component of PHC system-strengthening, UNICEF supported modelling of home-visiting services for young children. According to MICS 2020, national coverage of visits for newborns by postnatal care services two days after discharge from maternity reduced from 29 per cent in 2018 to 11 per cent in 2020. However, postnatal care visits for newborns in districts where these services are modelled with UNICEF support increased from 56 per cent in August 2019 to 97 per cent in June 2021. With UNICEF assistance, a national telemedicine platform was launched with 132 family doctors and 16 specialised doctors from higher healthcare levels.

UNICEF, together with other partners, supported the Ministry of Health (MOH) in conducting the first ever National Integrated Micronutrient and Anthropometric Survey (NIMAS) which will be the basis for updating the national nutrition programme. The survey covered a total of 3400 households, collecting data, blood and urine samples from children, adolescent girls and pregnant women nationwide.

UNICEF's support to pandemic response increasingly focused on COVID-19 vaccination, including communication, to overcome significant vaccine hesitancy within the population. UNICEF supported the government in receiving over 1.28 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines through COVAX and facilitated the logistics for an additional nearly 1.25 million doses outside COVAX. UNICEF also supported the provision of additional cold chain equipment including the first-ever ultra-cold chain fridges. With UNICEF's support, evidence-based social and behaviour change strategies and innovative solutions are increasingly used by the Government, non-governmental, media and development partners for generating vaccination demand, including for COVID-19.

Furthermore, UNICEF strengthened the national immunization system by improving the cold chain, vaccine procurement and data management, and increasing knowledge and acceptance of vaccination among parents. UNICEF built the capacity of 3,000 members of 952 Village Health Committees on the importance of vaccination to help them raise awareness in their communities. UNICEF also supported targeted outreach to parents of over 8,000 children who were not fully vaccinated.

UNICEF assisted 163 healthcare facilities and nine regional hospitals in establishing new standard operating procedures on infection prevention and control (IPC) measures, developed a guiding manual

and provided IPC supply items.

Goal Area 2: Every child learns

UNICEF continued to co-chair the Education Working Group of the Development Partner Coordination Council (DPCC), and to convene partners regularly to assess progress and emerging priorities. UNICEF's support to the Education Management Information System (EMIS) contributed to effective data collection, making it interoperable with other key sectoral MIS to support planning and financing decisions. This work was recognised by an external validation mission of the EU Commission.

Within the COVID-19 emergency response, and in support of the safe reopening of schools, UNICEF continued to provide sanitizers (28 tons) and liquid soap (32 tons) to over 400 schools most in need. UNICEF mobilized a three-year, US\$2.4 million grant to support the government with catch-up learning and the safe reopening of schools.

As part of the continuous investment in Early Childhood Education (ECE) reform with support of the Global Partnership for Education, UNICEF developed the capacity of 871 technical officials in the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES), the Ministry of Finance and local government on ECE planning and budgeting. The quality of ECE service provision was strengthened by revising the national ECE curriculum with a focus on gender sensitivity and inclusion.

UNICEF supported ECE workers and parents of young children by providing access to online learning platforms and digital technologies. MOES launched the Parenting App Bebo to support parents of children aged 0–6 years with comprehensive, evidence-based information and interactive tools covering children's health, well-being and development issues. The Learning Passport was launched to ensure continuity of early learning through a high-quality digital learning solution that complements traditional in-person learning and support for ECE educators, children and parents. The plan is to gradually expand the use of the platform to primary and secondary school level.

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

After more than three years of concerted advocacy from UNICEF and NGO partners, a new version of the Child Code and an accompanying package of 17 legal amendments were developed and approved by Parliament in July 2021. This is a landmark document expected to significantly improve the existing child protection system. For the first time, the Code bans all forms of violence against children, prevents their institutionalization, and requires formal guardianship arrangements for children whose parents are migrating abroad. The Code also supports the establishment of a child-friendly justice system and professionalizes the social services workforce. By end of 2021, however, the Code had not yet been signed by the President which prevents its final adoption and implementation.

As part of child protection system-strengthening, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration (MOLSWM) to roll out a digital management information system for case management of vulnerable children nationwide.

With support of UNICEF and other partners, the Criminal Procedure and Misdemeanours Code was brought into compliance with international standards, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Reconciliation in response to violence against children (VAC) cases is now prohibited, resulting in criminalization of all cases of VAC. The new Code introduces child-friendly procedures in all criminal processes where children are involved. Child-friendly, free legal aid has been introduced in all civil, criminal and administrative procedures involving children.

A report analysing judicial practices around child marriage revealed improvements needed for case

reporting and better protection of child rights at hearings. The findings and possible solutions were discussed with members of Parliament, government officials, judges and civil society.

Goal area 4: Every child lives in a safe and clean environment

Kyrgyzstan adopted its updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) and submitted the document to the Secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The updated NDCs included a child-sensitive commitment related to the school-based disaster risk reduction (DRR) programme. This has been implemented jointly in all the country's schools by the Ministry of Emergency Situations and the MOES, with UNICEF support and funding from the Government of Japan. The two ministries have agreed to and signed a roadmap for the joint implementation of this school-based DRR initiative nationwide. Trainings and school-based emergency simulations continue with the active support of the UNICEF volunteer programme and the Red Crescent Society of Kyrgyzstan (RCSK).

Air pollution has rapidly become a critical health, environmental, and social issue and is set to worsen unless adequate mitigation measures are put in place. In response, UNICEF launched a comprehensive study to determine the health and social impact of air pollution on women and children in Bishkek. The aim is to mobilize a sustained movement towards policy change to reduce air pollution.

Goal Area 5: Every child has access to inclusive social protection and lives free from poverty

UNICEF's tailored policy advocacy contributed to the strengthening of social sector priorities in the new National Development Programme 2021–2026. The NDP target is to reduce child poverty to 25 per cent (from 31.8 per cent in 2020) and prioritizes child education and development, effective delivery of health and social services, sound programme-based budgeting and fostering of private financing via public–private partnerships. The plan also includes a mother and child (0–3 years) benefit linked to public health measures.

UNICEF provided technical assistance in the largest legal inventory (359 laws) ever conducted in Kyrgyzstan to align legislation with the new constitution, ensuring that children-related issues were covered in the revised legal framework. For example, UNICEF advocated for protecting legal provisions on breastfeeding and nutrition in the health law and keeping multilingual education as a key provision in new laws on education and on state language.

UNICEF established an effective partnership with the newly established Office of the Child Rights Commissioner, an important new avenue for the monitoring of child rights. In 2021, the Child Rights Commissioner led the steering committee for the development of the situation analysis of children, composed of the relevant ministries and NGOs.

In partnership with UNDP, UNICEF continued to implement the Joint Programme on the Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF). UNICEF's focus is on the education sector, with linkages to the wider national development financing landscape. In particular, UNICEF conducted a study on the efficiency of public expenditure in education which will be finalized and disseminated in 2022. UNICEF worked closely with the Public–Private Partnership (PPP) unit, under the Ministry of Finance, to establish a PPP framework in ECE. The joint programme also served as an entry point to establish collaboration on strategic planning and financing with the President's Administration.

Adolescent and Youth programming

In 2021, Kyrgyzstan became a 'Generation Unlimited' country owing to the demographic composition of the country and the UNICEF office's sustained commitment to adolescent and youth development. Generation Unlimited is a global multi-sector partnership to meet the urgent need for expanded

education, training and employment opportunities for young people aged 10 to 24. UNICEF used this opportunity to rally support for a multi-stakeholder approach to building the youth agenda together with UN agencies and other partners, and secured commitment from the Government to expand the Youth Coordination mechanism to include youth and the private sector.

Efforts to strengthen adolescent participation were enhanced after President Sadyr Japarov chaired an awards ceremony for the top three youth- and child-friendly local governance (YCFLG) municipalities, based on a national contest led by the government and conducted in 2020–2021 with UNICEF support. The President made a commitment to institutionalize and expand the initiative nationwide.

In October 2021, a digital youth engagement platform U-Report was launched by the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports and Youth Policy and attracted over 7,000 U-Reporters.

Key advances in equipping adolescents with 21st-century skills and expanding opportunities to transition from education to employment were achieved. ProductLabs is an online social innovation tool that supports skills building and social innovation start-ups, aimed at creating new pathways to employment. In 2021, 508 young people (390 girls and 332 boys) benefited from this tool and built skills in critical thinking, leadership, collaboration, problem-solving, research and public speaking.

Gender transformative programming

Country Office improved the integration of gender programming across country programme areas and strengthened internal processes and this achieved important gender results.

With the support of the UN Spotlight Initiative that aims to combat gender-based violence, UNICEF partnered with Okuu Kitebi (a scientific and pedagogical offshoot of MOES) to develop anti-discrimination and gender-capacity building methodology for curriculum experts. As a result, 18 Russian-speaking and Kyrgyz-speaking experts were trained and 61 textbooks reviewed.

Training modules for five science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects were updated to integrate gender-sensitive content for in-service teachers jointly with the Republican Teacher Training Institute. Training on gender-responsive pedagogy was provided to 119 teachers and 33 other staff.

A total of 989 female peer-educators participated in life skills, leadership and civic engagement training and subsequently shared their knowledge with 12,851 adolescents (5,697 boys and 7,154 girls). Under the STEM4Girls project, 651 girls led sessions as peer-trainers for 12,401 girls on gender equality, gender-based violence and child and forced marriage.

Over 1,000 girls involved in the STEM4Girls programme also benefited from the mentorship of 113 professional women working in science or business. UNICEF supported the development of a new story on the “Spring in Bishkek” app, a game promoting girls’ education and combating child marriage, reaching over 150,000 people.

Disability programming

UNICEF conducted a situation analysis of children and adolescents with disabilities which enabled policy dialogue and informed the State Party report of the Kyrgyz Government on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

One of the key recommendations of the situation analysis is to focus on changing negative attitudes towards children with disabilities and their families. Based on the study *Attitudes towards Children with Disabilities and their Families*, a group of stakeholders began to develop a communication roadmap.

A draft *Roadmap for Early Identification and Early Intervention for Children with Disabilities* has included recommendations from UNICEF and representatives of the health sector and NGOs.

Humanitarian Programmes

In response to the violent cross-border conflict with Tajikistan in Batken region, UNICEF mobilized a multisectoral humanitarian response. Two UNICEF staff participated in the UN Rapid Emergency Assessment Team to inform the response plan. Through the Red Crescent Society of Kyrgyzstan (RCSK), UNICEF provided pre-positioned supplies, including a total of 598 family hygiene kits, four ECD kits and four recreation kits. Together with a local NGO, UNICEF established 13 child-friendly spaces to provide psychosocial support to children and parents, reaching 5,440 children to date. To improve emergency preparedness, approximately 1,415 pre-school children and 62 teachers from 15 community-based kindergartens benefited from learning and training materials on safe behaviour in emergencies, peace and inclusive early learning.

After concerted advocacy by UNICEF and partners, the Government repatriated 79 children of Kyrgyz nationals from Iraq. UNICEF provided financial and technical support for their repatriation and long-term reintegration in partnership with RCSK. The government fulfilled its commitment to undertake this humanitarian operation in line with agreed child rights principles. By the end of July, all children were reintegrated with their extended families. UNICEF supported the development of a multi-sectoral plan; a media training on ethical reporting; logistical support for repatriation; provision of psychosocial support; court proceedings for issuance of official documents; and ensuring catch-up learning to support their integration into local schools.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Partnerships is a key strategy for UNICEF Kyrgyzstan in achieving and amplifying results for children. In 2021, UNICEF partnered with a wide range of national government counterparts, development partners including UN sister agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In addition, this year UNICEF has carried out business impact analysis to explore new opportunities for harnessing the power of private sector for children in Kyrgyzstan. The analysis will inform UNICEF's new Country Programme.

UNICEF took on a number of coordination roles among development partners. Jointly with USAID, UNICEF co-chaired the Development Partners Coordination Council's Working Group on Education. The aim was to ensure a coordinated approach to supporting the Ministry of Education and Science in advancing sector reform based on the newly validated Education Sector Strategy. Similarly, jointly with the World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF co-led a joint advocacy of the DPCC Working Group on Social Protection to ensure that social protection has a stronger role and higher recognition in the new national mid-term development strategy 2023–2027.

UNICEF led a multi-stakeholder effort to implement NIMAS jointly with WFP, the Food and Agriculture Organization, WHO, USAID, Advancing Nutrition/USAID, and Mercy Corps. The survey results will serve as a foundation for updating national nutrition strategy.

Considering structural shifts within the Government, UNICEF developed partnerships with the new Presidential Administration to promote the importance of investing in human capital development and the prioritization of social sectors in the new mid-term development programme. Partnering with the new Commissioner for Child Rights is central for developing a systematic mechanism for monitoring the realization of child rights.

Advocacy and partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration enabled the repatriation and reintegration of children from Iraq. The expertise of other UN agencies was leveraged in promoting results for children and women. UNICEF has partnered with UNDP, UNFPA, UN WOMEN and UNODC under the EU-funded Spotlight Initiative, coordinated by the Resident Coordinator Office, to end violence against women and girls. The Kyrgyz Republic is the first Spotlight country to complete Phase 1 of the initiative. Productive partnerships with the Resident Coordinator Office and UNDP within the Joint Programme on Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) have enabled synergy in policy advocacy on development finance and helped put budgeting for children on the agenda. UNICEF co-led with UNFPA the Results Group on Social Protection, Education and Health, ensuring joint planning and coordination with the Government.

Thanks to the strong partnership with the Government of Japan, a new grant was awarded to UNICEF for safe school reopening and catch-up learning as part of the COVID-19 response. As part of UNICEF's dedicated support to COVID-19 communication, a new partnership was established with the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sport and Youth Policy to promote routine vaccination; the Ministry is now in charge of coordinating public communication for COVID-19 vaccination.

UNICEF has solidified its partnership with key stakeholders working in adolescent development and participation, particularly with MOCISYP, UNFPA and GIZ and the United Nations Youth Thematic Group.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

One of the legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the rapid development and implementation of digital platforms to reach and support children, adolescents and parents.

Building on the investments in technology and digitalization within the health and education sectors at the onset of COVID-19, in 2021 UNICEF Kyrgyzstan prioritized suitable digital platforms, such as open-source products that fit the current digital environment and long-term sustainability of the sector development within the financial constraints of the Government.

For example, UNICEF provided support to the Ministry of Health in adapting an open-source telemedicine solution which has proved to work in low-cost, low-bandwidth settings and is customized for use in the field. The platform is built on a unique Digital Assistant which provides real-time job aids and clinical decision workflows to make it possible for family doctors to adhere to the national clinical protocols at the point of care. Through this tool, general practitioners can also consult with specialists on medical cases that require expert knowledge.

Currently, 132 family doctors and 16 specialized medical doctors from secondary and tertiary health facilities are using the platform. Communication activities continue to ensure that families are aware of telemedicine services at the relevant health facilities and that trained family doctors are monitored to implement telemedicine successfully.

UNICEF and MOES developed and launched two new mobile applications, Bebbio and Learning Passport, to help pre-school educators and parents access timely and high-quality teaching and learning materials where direct contact with service providers is not possible. These tools help mitigate learning loss experienced during the school closures of 2020 due to COVID-19. The Bebbio app can also be used offline which is convenient for users with limited access to internet.

In October 2021, UNICEF in partnership with the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports and Youth Policy launched the digital youth engagement platform U-Report, a tool that empowers young people around the world. To date, 7,032 young people have subscribed to U-Report to express their views on issues that are important for their lives and in their communities. As participation in the platform grows, the results of the polls will inform decision making of both local and national authorities. With the help of U-Report, socially important and useful information can also be conveyed to young people even in the most remote regions of the country. The results of the polls can be used for further dialogue between adolescents and young people and other stakeholders, including government officials.

Instead of building a standalone platform, UNICEF partnered with UNDP to expand their job search app for young people with a new function that matches adolescents and young people with volunteer and intern opportunities to help them acquire their first experience of work. This new component - called *Opportunities Marketplace* - also supports skills building and strengthens pathways from education to employment.