

## Cambodia

### Update on the context and situation of children

COVID-19 outbreaks in early 2022 prompted continued national economic stimulus measures, including cash transfers. Inflation in Cambodia peaked at 7.8 per cent mid-year due to global economic uncertainties, impacting near-poor households, resulting in reduced consumption and a drop in employment levels. The World Bank simulated the potential impact of inflation as a 4 per cent increase in poverty levels. In June 2022, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) Committee issued its conclusions to the Government. The positive momentum towards addressing urgent child rights deprivations resulted in the approval by the Prime Minister of the *Circular on the Implementation of CRC Concluding Recommendations*. In June 2022, Cambodia held commune elections; 80.3 per cent of registered voters cast ballots to elect councilors from 17 registered parties across 1,652 communes. The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won a majority of seats.

While maternal mortality and infant/under-5 mortality continued to improve, continued challenges in neonatal mortality (50 per cent of Under-5 deaths), a minority of 'Zero Dose' (unvaccinated) children, stagnancy in child wasting, and high rates of adolescent pregnancy posed setbacks to progress in various development outcomes, particularly health.

Gaps in public financing for sanitation and fragmented water supply service delivery models thwarted improvements in this sector, putting the country off-track to reach relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets by 2030.

Despite high net enrolment (91.9 per cent) at primary school level, a quarter of grade 3 learners were unable to write a single word in a dictation test, while just 32.2 per cent (net) of adolescents were enrolled in upper secondary education. Educational goals were compromised further by 'learning loss' due to pandemic disruptions.

Children continued to face physical, emotional, and sexual violence, including online. In 2021, 11 per cent of internet users aged 12–17 in Cambodia were subjected to clear examples of online sexual exploitation and abuse. Low reporting, high rates of acceptance of violence, and inadequate access to support services and justice mechanisms complicated the situation.

Cambodia is a source, destination, and transit trafficking country for commercial sexual exploitation, forced labour and domestic work, especially exposing adolescents and children to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), violence, unplanned pregnancies, and substance use problems.

Rural-to-urban migration was high (affecting 64 per cent of those between 20 and 34). Young migrants possess limited vocational training and skills, and have low remuneration with minimal upward mobility or stability (as in the garment, construction and service industries).

Cambodia is a disaster-prone country, experiencing seasonal floods and droughts affecting up to 25 per cent of the population. The country ranks 46th on the Children's Climate Risk Index (CCRI), slightly better than neighbouring countries. However, there has been no comprehensive assessment of the impact of climate change on children to guide the national response.

Cambodia's ambition to achieve middle-income status in 2027 calls for accelerated human capital development through equitable resource redistribution and continued social protection measures, alongside improved access to quality digital education, social welfare and primary healthcare, and mitigative/adaptative measures to build climate resilience.

## Major contributions and drivers of results

### Goal Area 1 – Every child survives and thrives

UNICEF continued supporting the Government's COVID-19 response, including the expansion of vaccination to younger children and introduction of mRNA vaccines. Through UNICEF's advocacy and technical support alongside partners, best practices learned from the pandemic - including stronger community engagement and outreach, integrated approaches, equity analysis and digital innovation - were incorporated into new health sector strategies to strengthen primary health care and routine childhood immunization. In particular, UNICEF was a lead partner to the Ministry of Health (MOH) on Social and Behaviour Change (SBC), Technology for Development (T4D), and environmental health initiatives with plans to scale-up next year, including introducing the country's first Electronic Immunization Record and a new *Zero Dose* strategy to reach missed children. UNICEF supported the Government to strengthen the prevention and treatment of wasting, through substantial resource mobilization and integrating nutrition into the Health Management Information System (HMIS). This enabled plans to scale-up Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) treatment to six new provinces in 2023, tripling current levels of coverage. UNICEF supported the Government in strengthening SBC for improved effectiveness and inclusiveness of health and nutrition interventions, through development of a national SBC curriculum for health service providers, the roll-out of a nurturing care parenting package and new tools co-created with parents. Joint Government and UN efforts promoted healthy diets for adolescents and facilitated dialogue on nutrition-sensitive social protection. UNICEF's support to Government resulted in over 14.5 million people in Cambodia, including nearly 5 million children, being protected against COVID-19 through vaccinations. With UNICEF's support, a total of 6,657 children with SAM received lifesaving treatment, exceeding annual targets. 3,554 schoolchildren received nutrition support and 453 Village Health Support Group members benefited from innovative digital learning platforms to improve skills around COVID-19 Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE). This helped them promote mental health, well-being and Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD) services in their communities.

### Goal Area 2 – Every child learns

After extended school closures (affecting 250 out of 400 days during the two school years between 2019 and 2021), Cambodian schools re-opened in January 2022. Cambodian students' learning levels were low even before the pandemic as shown by the SEA-PLM 2019 results, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this further. A UNICEF supported analysis found that learning outcomes deteriorated in both Khmer language and mathematics between 2016 and 2021, indicating clear evidence of learning loss. UNICEF leveraged this to increase investment in the Early Grade Learning programme, supporting its largest-ever expansion covering 1,582 (917 females) Grade 1 teachers and 891 (582 female) Grade 2 teachers, reaching approximately 110,000 (51,150 girls) out of the total 783,382 Grade 1-2 students nationwide. The programme included comprehensive support for teachers, enabling them to deliver effective teaching and learning for early graders to acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Through the Capacity Development Partnership Fund (CDPF), UNICEF supported Cambodia's first-ever implementation of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which assesses 15-year-old students' reading, mathematics, and science literacy, with the results to be used for further unpacking the strengths and weaknesses in Cambodian children's learning. The process for the 2nd round SEAPLM also started in 2022 and will complement the NLA and PISA results. Through intensive distance education experiences during school closure, digital education became a new priority for the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS). While a number of digital tools and platforms have been implemented with the involvement of multiple actors, including the private sector, they are not well coordinated or harmonised. Formulation of a national digital education strategy was initiated by MoEYS with UNICEF/CDPF support to develop coherent visions and plans on digital education.

Teacher reform continues to be a priority for MoEYS in its efforts to improve quality of education and learning outcomes. UNICEF contributed to the development and expansion of various in-service and pre-service teacher training programmes such as early childhood education, inclusive education, multilingual education and life skills education. New materials and lesson plans for life skills education for grades 4-9 focusing on climate change were developed and will be rolled out in 2023 by MoEYS.

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

UNICEF made significant progress in enhancing the Child Protection (CP) system in Cambodia. The Child Protection Law and Standard Operating Procedures were finalised, contributing to strengthening the legislative framework for protection of children and adolescents. The first Child Protection Strategic Implementation Plan 2022-2027 was drafted along with the Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS) Strategy. Both documents set out a clear vision for the implementation of child protection interventions in the country and will contribute to strengthening CP information management. Following June 2022's CRC concluding observations by the CRC Committee to the Government, UNICEF has supported the Cambodia National Council for Children (CNCC) to convene line Ministries to assign roles and responsibilities to address the recommendations, and develop a framework to monitor actions and progress across sectors. UNICEF contributed to tackling Online Child Sexual Exploitation And Abuse (OCSEA) with the launch of the Disrupting Harm report, which for the first time shone a spotlight on the magnitude of OCSEA in the country. Following this, Cambodia hosted the ASEAN ICT Forum on Child Online Protection in November 2022. This event promoted government, civil society, private sector and adolescents' engagement in preventing and responding to OCSEA. Adolescents' engagement continued to be promoted through the expansion of the Adolescent and Youth Reference Group (AYRG) across 10 provinces. Through AYRG, young people engaged in policy dialogues, and awareness-raising initiatives such as violence against children, online safety, and child marriage.

### **Goal area 4 – Every child lives in a safe and clean environment**

UNICEF focused on strengthening the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector's systems and capacities to enable access to safe and Climate Resilient (CR) WASH services for communities and institutions. Approximately 700,000 people, including children and women, have benefitted from WASH services provided by UNICEF during 2022, including 466,000 people receiving hygiene related COVID support. In terms of sector financing, actions were taken to leverage domestic resources, with an increased 2023 state budget allocation for WASH, and to develop innovative financing approaches for the sector with the preparation of a blended financing initiative for the SDG Fund.

The work done at sub-national level to promote private sector engagement reaffirmed the importance of strengthening WASH markets as a key driver to boost access. UNICEF, in line with the national decentralization and deconcentration agenda, played a strategic role in supporting the acceleration of sanitation results, with the revision of the national Open Defecation Free (ODF) verification guidelines to transfer functions to the sub-national level for more efficient and agile certification protocols for communities claiming ODF status. Furthermore, UNICEF scaled up sanitation marketing strategies including new resource packages for sanitation districts' plans. The negative impact of climate change remains an additional challenge slowing progress towards WASH results. To address capacity gaps at different levels, a CR WASH risk assessment was developed, and relevant training modules have been rolled out in partnership with Stockholm International Water Institute to support CR planning for WASH interventions. UNICEF supported work to include indicators in EMIS and HMIS for monitoring SDG progress on WASH in Schools and Health Facilities. Cambodia is one of the four pilot countries globally to pilot Children's Climate and Disaster Risk Model at the sub-national level.

### **Goal area 5 – Every child has an equitable chance in life**

UNICEF continued to prioritise its work on ensuring access to social services, particularly social

protection within the context of the continued impact of COVID-19, exacerbated by the global price/inflation crisis. UNICEF supported continued delivery of COVID-19 social protection measures and delivery of flood and inflation cash transfers for over 4 million Cambodians while ensuring continued delivery of routine social protection measures for children, pregnant women, and Persons with Disability (PwD). The Social Assistance National (SNA) Fund was created to manage delivery of all national cash transfers, highlighting the commitment to social protection of vulnerable and at-risk populations in Cambodia. This includes a Family Package of integrated cash transfers to be rolled out in 2023/24 with UNICEF support. Focus on protection of PwD and other vulnerable groups continued through advocacy and development of tools to track risk, vulnerability and disability, and engage in the design of future complementary programmes such as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) for poor and at-risk youth. This aims to improve linkages between social protection, complementary programmes and basic social services in the future. Continued budget cuts, commune elections and high pressure to address the lingering impact of COVID-19 led to uneven budget allocations for social sectors and under-performance of communes in allocating budgets for social services. As a result, UNICEF continued to advocate and build capacity for planning and budgeting for social services at central and sub-national levels, particularly for vulnerable children, while promoting citizen and youth engagement in local planning processes. UNICEF positively influenced and supported work on budget transparency with national authorities while providing support to civil society for budget advocacy.

### **Cross-sectoral change strategies and enablers**

A multi-sectoral SBC strategy was developed in 2022 to strengthen cross-sectoral linkages and complementarity of interventions within the Country Programme. The strategy defined a set of behavioural priorities and interventions to promote positive changes in knowledge, norms and practices through the active engagement of children, adolescents, women and men and relevant duty bearers to help realize the survival, development, learning, protection and participation rights of children and adolescents. In addition, it provided a way forward on strengthening the SBC capacity of national systems to effectively integrate relevant strategies in planning and budgeting for social services. The 2022 Country Programme Evaluation (CPE) found that SBC played a crucial role and had been mainstreamed across all sections and that the strategy reflected the global UNICEF strategic shift from Communication for Development (C4D) to SBC, aligned with the UNICEF Strategic Plan for 2022-2025.

The CPE also stated that UNICEF played a positive and leading role in SBC which complemented the UN Cambodia Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19 Framework guiding RCCE at the national and subnational levels. Further, the health and nutrition programme played a crucial role in strengthening multi-sectoral SBC approaches using COVID-19 resources as leverage and entry points.

UNICEF and other partners supported incorporation of the Nurturing Care (NC) Framework into a Policy and a National Action Plan on Early Childhood Care and Development (NAP-ECCD). UNICEF provided technical assistance to strengthen sub-national multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms which resulted in the launch and dissemination of the NAP-ECCD, Nurturing Care Parenting manual and training at national and sub-national levels. With support from Kratie UNICEF Zonal Office, the Provincial Women and Children Consultative Committee (PWCCC) in Kratie is operationalising the NAP at a sub-national level and experiences and lessons learned from this will inform PWCCC in other provinces.

The IECD workplan and activities were guided by an internal taskforce established to identify and prioritise strategic approaches to improving early-years outcomes for children. A UNICEF internal business plan for Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD), including a roadmap with milestones, was developed to guide activities at the sub-national level. The Kratie zone office developed a sub-national Situational Analysis, enabling a “deep dive” into child-level data. Operationalisation of the ECCD National Action Plan (NAP) began in Kratie because of the multi-

deprivations encountered by young children in that province.

Private Sector Engagement (PSE) work commenced following the PSE strategy developed in 2021. Significant work on child safety included: mapping of ICT industry players; advocacy on Child Online Protection (COP), positioning of UNICEF at high-level events (such as the ASEAN ICT Forum); and production of industry guidance. The opportunities to further the COP with the industry were discussed at the forum and all the member states and relevant stakeholders were encouraged to continue constructive discussion at national level through national spin-off events and explore organizing Industry Working Group on COP. UNICEF and the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPTC) organized a COP Industry Engagement Kick-off meeting in June 2022. Around 150 stakeholders, including approximately 20 companies, participated in the discussion around business' responsibilities in protecting children online.

Government, private sector and other partners were also instrumental in the second year of UNICEF Cambodia's Generation Future initiative, led by 100 young leaders and volunteers launching fifteen social good projects addressing issues including climate change and youth employment. 898 students joined in-person workshops in partnership with the MoEYS, while hundreds participated online. On World Children's Day, these successes were showcased in a public event, motivating 150 attending partners from multiple sectors to provide further support. 'Business for Results' training was organised for senior managers at UNICEF Cambodia to build office capacity to support this new, innovative work.

The office also engaged with adolescents and young people during the Situation Analysis and Country Programme development process through consultations at the national and subnational levels. Feedback from these in-person consultations pointed to the needs to address concerns related to child marriage, neglect, school dropout, discrimination, violence and mental health, and was complemented by a wider U-Report survey. Implementation of the office-wide Adolescent Development and Participation (ADAP) plan, alongside operationalisation through the Siem Reap Zonal Office, contributed to promoting systematic structures for engagement with young people, increasing the provision of adolescent-friendly services, and improving the enabling environment for adolescents to develop and participate in matters that affect their lives.

Building on the office-wide ADAP plan, the Siem Reap Zonal Office developed its own ADAP plan, which focused on building systematic platforms for adolescent engagement at the subnational level. The plan also addressed norms at the community level that impact the ability of adolescents to meaningfully participate in decision making processes as well as getting access to safe and confidential reporting mechanisms. Significant progress on the zonal office plan implementation included increased knowledge on youth development policy among sub-national authorities, an expansion of local life skills focusing on climate change in more than 40 per cent of lower secondary schools in target provinces, increased representation of young people in Commune Committees for Women and Children (CCWC), and the expansion of the NGO-led Adolescent and Youth Reference Group (AYRG).

The office conducted a Gender Programmatic Review (GPR) which assessed the strengths and weaknesses in the current Country Programme on gender analysis and programming. The findings of this GPR indicate that a stronger and more concerted effort is needed to ensure gender-responsive/transformational programming efforts within the country office. Many foundational efforts have been made to facilitate gender equity and inclusivity, and to reduce vulnerability (including gender-based violence risk mitigation during the COVID-19 pandemic, support to the national cash transfer programme, and parental and community engagement). They set the stage for amplified cross-sectoral efforts in the next Country Programme, with the potential for gender-transformational outcomes. While gender is increasingly being integrated into planning and monitoring, capacity building for both staff and external partners is necessary to collate gender disaggregated evidence, conduct gender

sensitive analysis, and design gender-transformative programmes that address social norms and support achievement of results for all children and adolescents.

## UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Partnerships were nurtured by UNICEF, towards broader, longer-term efforts to advance equitable access to primary healthcare beyond COVID-19. UNICEF worked with MOH, WHO, GAVI, and the Clinton Health Access Initiative on a new Zero Dose strategy for immunisation incorporating best pandemic practices. Collaboration with WHO and the World Bank strengthened digital health coordination, while UNICEF worked with the Council for Agricultural and Rural Development, WFP, FAO, and WHO on high-level nutrition advocacy, and with the private sector on innovative cold-chain and communication technologies.

UNICEF continued chairing the Education Sector Working Group and co-chairing the Joint Technical Working Group, playing a central role in policy advocacy and sector coordination. UNICEF also managed the Capacity Development Partnership Fund, a pooled fund from the European Union, Global Partnership for Education, Sweden and USAID. It was the main vehicle facilitating systematic capacity development of education officials, teachers, teacher educators, systems and institutions. UNICEF led several policy dialogues and consultations and contributed to the re-prioritization of MoEYS strategies in conjunction with the Education Strategic Plan Mid-term Review, preparing for the Transforming Education Summit (TES) and the “*National Statement of Commitment to Transform Education System in Cambodia*” following the TES, and the application for a new round of GPE funding.

UNICEF’s collaboration with the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, ECPAT, Interpol and national NGOs generated evidence on the magnitude of OCSEA, resulting in the launch of the ‘Disrupting Harm’ report (conducted by UNICEF Innocenti’s Office of Research). Partnership with the Government and private sectors on OCSEA culminated in the first ASEAN ICT forum on online child protection hosted by the Cambodian Government, greatly increasing awareness.

UNICEF partnered with UNDP to develop the Cambodia Innovative Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Financing Mechanism Joint Proposal to the SDG Fund, to remove financing and viability blockages in the water and solid waste sectors. UNICEF also strengthened its partnership with Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) towards the Climate Resilient WASH agenda as well as strategically engaging with Stockholm International Water Institute to develop Climate Resilient WASH training modules.

UNICEF/ILO’s joint programme on Accelerating Social Protection in Cambodia and the WFP/UNICEF’s Shock-Responsive Family Package, developed with the European Community Humanitarian Office, have consolidated partnership in social protection while more in-depth programmatic collaboration was achieved with Germany’s GIZ and DFAT. UNICEF continued leading coordination of national social assistance development partners and the UN Social Protection Accelerator. Partnership with the EU in Public Financial Management (PFM) enabled stronger advocacy for improved PFM in social sectors.

Mental health was an increasing challenge for children/youth, according to social listening service, Talkwalker. Consultations with young people confirmed mental health was stigmatised, with little support available. UNICEF launched “I Feel Better When...” a digital campaign to provide new mental health tools and knowledge. 40 creative assets reached 15,000,000 people; Cambodian youth testimonies were shared by UNICEF’s global channels and Cambodian universities/diaspora. In addition, AYRG groups expanded to ten provinces, with increasing systematic participation of adolescents in policy dialogues and leading awareness-raising efforts in communities.

## Lessons Learned and Innovations

Identification of vulnerable populations for purposes of targeting interventions remains difficult and was the case with identification of poor households and those with disabilities who were most vulnerable, and it was critical that they not miss receiving COVID vaccines. Due to its work across several sectors in this case with social protection and health sectors, UNICEF is in a unique position to create greater positive impact by ensuring cross-sectoral data analysis and action and increasing our partners' alignment. UNICEF facilitated the use of data by the Government to identify IDPoor populations and PwD, thus improving targeting and outreach for COVID-19 vaccines. UNICEF also demonstrated its capabilities in SBC and T4D by working on important initiatives with the Government, such as the first digital immunization roadmap, digital learning platforms, and parenting tools based on human-centred design.

UNICEF provided technical support to MoEYS in formulating a national digital education strategy. The technical transformation brought about by the increased use of IT services and different digital solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic has provided opportunities to innovate, but there is a need to be cautious around what is technically achievable versus what is institutionally acceptable and feasible. It is crucial to establish a holistic vision and strategy first that will guide systematic and equitable introduction and expansion of effective digital education tools and solutions.

High level and consistent advocacy by UNICEF facilitated the total adoption of the CRC committee's concluding observations by the Government with the aim of advancing children's rights across sectors, while initiating discussions on legislative reforms on sensitive issues, such as corporal punishment, child trafficking, and online abuse. Adolescent and young people's engagement through the Cambodia PROTECT campaign offered a promising practice to systematically engage young people in UNICEF programmes and provided lessons learned on the need to emphasise adolescents' participation in all stages of programming and advocacy.

Leveraging financing is an urgent priority if the WASH sector is to achieve its targets. UNICEF can help de-risk investments, develop a pipeline of bankable projects and support Government and partners in climate-proofing WASH services. UNICEF is increasingly expected to play a stronger role in coordinating different sectoral workstreams under different line ministries, supporting more coherent approaches towards greater value for money in the sector's investment.

Building a strong digitalized core system for cash transfer delivery enables rapid and efficient expansion of new national social protection programmes. Digitalisation, however, does not fully support the needs of vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations as community officials still need to be fully engaged. UNICEF will continue to build a system that focuses both on digital solutions and a stronger social service workforce, through advocacy and facilitation of inter-ministerial dialogue to expand community social protection/social service workforces.

Evaluations when carried out well have the scope to generate innovative strategies and leverage accountability and learning. The Climate Resilient WASH evaluation included a benchmark paper for the WASH sector in Cambodia, opening the space for agreeing on minimum standards on climate resilient services for Cambodia. The office undertook Social Protection evaluations, which were implemented jointly, in order to maximize learnings from each other as well as increase resource efficiency.

Cambodian companies are still in a nascent stage in their consideration and adoption of the sustainability agenda (including the SDGs), resulting in challenges when initiating collaborations or establishing a UN Global Compact Local Network. UNICEF has an opportunity to position itself as a lead agency promoting children's rights among business communities to influence their business

conducts and operations in a child friendly manner for priority programme results (e.g., child online protection, family friendly policy, etc.) through its Change Strategy.

Lessons from 2022 will continue to inform efforts to enhance programming interventions and new initiatives supported by UNICEF Country Office in order to optimize the results for children in Cambodia.