

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Update on the context and situation of children

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) hosts one of the world's most complex and abandoned crises. In 2023, surging armed conflict and intercommunal clashes led to unprecedented levels of displacement, with nearly 15 million children bearing the brunt of escalating violence and recurrent disease outbreaks, further exacerbating chronic poverty and systemic weaknesses. The escalating armed conflict is posing a grave and multifaceted threat to the protection of civilians, particularly children. It extends beyond eastern DRC to the west of the country, with intercommunal conflict in Mai-Ndombe province, just 160 km north of the capital Kinshasa.

Internal displacement in DRC has risen to over 6.5 million people, with a 70 percent increase in the most affected provinces in the east (North Kivu, Ituri and South Kivu) in past months (OCHA).

To address this unprecedented level of needs and strengthen multi-sectorial emergency response, UNICEF and humanitarian partners scaled up their coordinated response efforts. This was done through activation of a six-month system wide scale-up along with UNICEF activation of its corporate emergency mechanism to accelerate the delivery of essential services and lifesaving assistance for children.

Widespread violence against the civilian population had a devastating impact on the rights of children. The overall number of grave violations against children, committed by the different parties to the conflict and verified by the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism increased. Children are exposed to killing, maiming, abduction, sexual violence and recruitment and use by armed groups. In 2023 there was a notable increase of about 20% in child recruitment and abductions compared to 2022. In addition, verified cases of sexual violence against children also sharply increased, rising up to 40 percent from January to June 2023 compared to the same period last year. However, the real numbers are probably much higher, due to a significant number of reported cases which were not yet verified due to access constraints in combat zones.

According to the child protection working group, the first half of the year saw a 130 percent increase in reported child protection incidents including arbitrary killing, kidnapping, extortion, rape and other gender-based violence, illustrating a deeply concerning pattern of abuse especially on children and throughout the country.

In September 2023, the DRC Government demanded the accelerated withdrawal of MONUSCO, the United Nations peace keeping mission present in the country since 1999. A phased disengagement plan was signed, outlining a progressive and full withdrawal from the east, starting with South Kivu province by end April 2024. Meanwhile, the East African Community regional forces already withdrew from the east by the end of 2023, creating a security vacuum that was since occupied by

armed groups further hampering the already dire conditions of women and children.

Children's rights to health and nutrition are undermined by epidemic outbreaks and persistent levels of wasting, with trends worsening as conflict and the reduced capacity of the health system persist. Measles outbreaks wrought havoc on children, with the number of suspected cases affecting over 300,000 children (around 6,000 deaths reported), almost doubling the 146,359 reported cases in 2022 and tripling the fatalities compared to previous year. Malnutrition remains critical, with more than 1.2 million children under 5 years of age requiring treatment for severe wasting. DRC also faces the worst cholera outbreak in six years, with close to 55,000 suspected cholera cases (65 percent children). On the other hand, successful Polio campaigns nearly halved the high caseload from 2022.

The impact of climate change is increasing with frequent floods and landslides impacting social services for children, including WASH infrastructure, schools, and healthcare facilities. In May 2023, in the vicinity of Kalehe in South Kivu province, a major landslide led to the death or disappearance of 3,000 people. In addition, in the last quarter 2023, heavy rainfall has led to an exceptional rise in the Congo River waters, affecting 17 of 26 provinces, including Kinshasa.

Immense reserves of natural resources continue to drive the country's economic growth – estimated by the World Bank at 6.8 percent in 2023 compared to 8.9 percent in 2022 – rendering the DRC's economy heavily dependent on raw materials as copper, coltan, cobalt and gold. While fiscal revenues increased significantly, providing added financing for the government to implement its National Strategic Development Plan, although less so for the education, health, nutrition, protection and WASH sectors which are key for children. These sectors also face structural and operational bottlenecks with only circa 50% of approved budgets implemented, slowing progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and miring 62 percent of the country's population in poverty, who's daily income is less than \$2.15 (World Bank 2023).

2023 marks the halfway point to the SDGs. DRC took part in the SDG Summit of Heads of State through a high-level mission led by the President himself. This event provided an opportunity to assess the progress made towards achieving the SDGs and allowed the identification of bottlenecks and solutions. These interventions aiming to accelerate the trajectory towards achieving the SDGs include the introduction of pre-primary classes, the reinforcement of the free primary education policy and strengthening of social protection systems for the most vulnerable. Furthermore, the first phase of new program of free maternity and newborn health care was launched by the highest authority in late 2023 to accelerate the implementation of Universal Health Coverage (UHC). It's nationwide rollout will require further reinforcement for women's access to skilled maternal health care services free of charge. The government also strengthened the representation of people living with disabilities in national institutions which is encouraging and needs to be further amplified in 2024.

The year ahead brings new challenges such as depreciation of local currency and withdrawal of

MONUSCO in a still volatile security context, as well as new opportunities on the political and economic growth fronts. UNICEF will continue working with national and decentralized institutions and partners in support of the fulfilment of children's rights, and strengthening linkages across humanitarian, development and peace efforts for children.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Aligned with the DRC National Development Plan, the DRC United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), UNICEF's global strategic plan (2022-2025) and contributing to the key results for children in the Western and Central Africa region, UNICEF and its partners sought to advance children's rights in health, nutrition, education, protection and water and sanitation. This was done through a series of change and transformative strategies including community engagement, gender mainstreaming, humanitarian and development nexus approach, advocacy and system strengthening to leave no child behind.

The following are some of the main results for children achieved by UNICEF and its partners.

Every child, including adolescents, survives and thrives with access to nutritious diets, quality primary health care, nurturing practices and essential supplies.

Despite the efforts and investments in recent years to boost immunization coverage across the country's vast territory, DRC health systems remain fragile. According to the last national immunization survey, only 45 percent of children are fully-vaccinated and 36 percent partially-vaccinated (12 to 24 months age group). "Zero-dose" children have never received any vaccine and are the most at-risk. UNICEF, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Health at national and provincial level, has proactively identified and vaccinated 203,185 zero dose children (out of the 734,000 identified in 2022) during Polio and measles campaigns last year. Reaching all zero dose children remains an unfinished task, and will be the focus of intensive action in 2024. In addition, 3,258,121 children (90 percent of the target) were protected against serious infectious diseases as Diphtheria, Pertussis and Tetanus through the 3rd dose of the DPT vaccine. This represents an 8 percent increase over the number of children reached last year. According to administrative data, following several measles outbreaks, 18,5 million children were also vaccinated during catch-up campaigns carried out in 22 out of the 26 provinces.

To continue strengthening the health system, UNICEF contributed to enhance and reinforce the cold-chain system in place, through the procurement of 3,423 additional solar refrigerators. This will allow for larger vaccine stocking capacities in health facilities and improved quality of immunization services. Proper maintenance of this newly acquired equipment for the institutional partners will be a challenge for the coming year. UNICEF will be accompanying the government to prevent and

overcome bottlenecks.

UNICEF also developed a strategy to address gender barriers across immunization interventions, to be further pursued in 2024. This includes: (i) sex disaggregated and gender data collection and analysis; (ii) leadership and empowerment of women and girls and their organizations; and (iii) engagement of men and boys on positive masculinity. To maximize chances for children to get their birth certificate, UNICEF led efforts to integrate birth registration and sanitation with routine immunization, facilitating access to birth certificates for newborns and improving the quality of health care services through sanitation and environmental cleaning kits provided to more than 3,500 vaccination sites.

Nurturing best practices in nutrition are at the core of children's health, and UNICEF DRC contributed to place nutrition at the center of the national agenda by organizing the first ever National Nutrition Forum in Kinshasa (October 2023) under the theme "Call for the promotion of a multisectoral, inclusive and synergistic approach to combating malnutrition in the DRC". The forum promoted the country's nutrition vision, integrating all nutrition sensitive sectors such as health, agriculture, education, water, hygiene and sanitation and social protection, in line with SDG 2. Furthermore, the organization of the first national nutrition survey, covering over 17,000 households and 20,000 children, is another major milestone which will allow for the provision of the latest reliable nutrition data for better planning and monitoring of the trends of nutrition status of children in DRC. Results, data and findings will be available in the first half of 2024.

In 2023, over 2,5 million children were screened for malnutrition and 320,000 severely malnourished children were provided treatment; out of which 81% were discharged and 95% (of the discharged) healed. In terms of prevention interventions, UNICEF maintained over 90 percent national coverage of vitamin A supplementation, reaching almost 19 million children aged 6-59 months, and supported deworming for nearly 14 million children aged 12-59 months. In addition, nearly 1,8 million mothers/caregivers of children under the age of two received orientation on optimal nutrition practices through preschool consultation in more than 8,000 health facilities.

Looking forward, UNICEF will also invest in new nutrition-sensitive sectors through support to women's agricultural cooperatives, as well as micro- and small-sized enterprises, to increase the production and transformation of nutritious complementary food and thereby reinforce efforts for the prevention of stunting and malnutrition, which is essential in DRC.

Every child, including adolescents, learns and acquire skills for the future.

The disparities in learning and access – particularly visible in girls' education – widened and was exacerbated by the escalation of conflicts in eastern DRC. Educational data speak for themselves, with

only 81 percent of girls transitioning from primary to secondary (compared to 86 percent boys) and only 72 percent girls completing lower secondary (compared to 78 percent of boys).

The need to improve the quality of education is also key, with 84 percent of students from grade 4 not having the minimum competencies in reading and up to 97 percent not having basic competencies in mathematics. In 2023, UNICEF placed a strong emphasis on promoting girls and young adolescents' formal and non-formal education along with continued access to education in emergencies, through strengthening linkages with other social sectors to overcome obstacles preventing adolescent girls to access and achieve education and thrive.

At an institutional level, UNICEF worked with partners to support the government in finalizing national strategies on vocational training and inclusive education. The aim was to boost employment opportunities for young people via engaging the private and public sectors, with a special focus on inclusion. Nearly 5,000 adolescents (2,854 girls) were trained with relevant skills for entering the job market. While this is still a drop in the ocean with respect to the employability needs of the large youth bulge in the DRC, UNICEF and partners will focus on large-scale innovative solutions in 2024 and onwards, to reach many more adolescents and youth with vocational and professional training opportunities.

Joint efforts with the Ministry of Education to improve access and retention in schools for adolescent girls, transformed schools into gender-sensitive platforms for integrated WASH and Protection services. Construction and equipment of 431 classrooms with separate latrines for girls reaching 21,550 children (10,344 girls) were further complemented by teacher training in the prevention of gender-based violence and gender-sensitive pedagogy. While nearly 200,000 girls received dignity kits and were informed on menstrual hygiene management.

Every child, including adolescents, is protected from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and other harmful practices.

As a follow-up to the landmark DRC Girls Forum held in December 2022, during which sexual violence against adolescent girls took center stage, UNICEF delivered on its commitment to reflect and design innovative interventions at scale to address this scourge. Informed by its newly developed Gender-Based Violence Strategy, UNICEF is scaling up innovative multi-sectoral girl-centered safe spaces, both physical and virtual, to provide specialized services such as mental health counselling and referrals. These spaces have already served thousands of women and adolescents, offering vital assistance in a challenging environment. Another illustration of the focus addressing violence against children is the significant expansion of the reach of UNICEF-supported interventions to protect children, with close to 500,000 children directly receiving child protection services (approximately 35 percent more children than 2022). Part of this achievement can be attributed to the scaling up in large urban areas of a community-based approach combining the deployment of trained para-social workers

and subsidized referrals to Health, Education and Social Protection services in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs, aligned with the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Another significant milestone was the registration of 2,062,244 children at birth under the civil registration system, marking a substantial 45 percent increase compared to 2022. This can be attributed to the improved strategic integration and interoperability between civil registration and health sectors. A pivotal moment in the journey towards improved administrative efficiency occurred in March 2023 with the official promulgation of the Digital Code, an initiative which UNICEF actively supported during 2022. Seizing this opportunity, UNICEF piloted the “digital vaccination register” which incorporate a birth registration module. The results were remarkable. While the national average for birth registration of children under 5 is 40 percent (MICS 2018), the provinces that took part in the electronic registration trial have made significant progress. Kinshasa achieved a registration rate of 95 percent (compared to 78 percent in 2022), Haut Katanga 84 per cent (up from 61 per cent in 2022) and Kasai Central 69 percent (versus 43 per cent in 2022). In 2024, efforts will be further accelerated in additional provinces to continue progress in this sector.

Every child, including adolescents, has access to safe and equitable water, sanitation and hygiene services, and lives in a safe and sustainable climate and environment.

In 2023 UNICEF DRC focused on enhanced climate-resilient water systems supporting nearly 460,000 people with access to safe drinking water, of which 31% have access to water systems supported by renewable energy such as solar powered water pumps. The capacity of water management committees and local authorities was reinforced for proper operation and maintenance of public water services. These interventions are being used to document the cost of water services and provide more value-for-money solutions in communities and institutions in 2024. Likewise, climate-resilient water services will be further strengthened in 2024.

In DRC, about 12 million people are still defecating in the open and UNICEF’s direct contribution allowed 2,3 million people to stop open defecation since 2021, with more than 1 million reached in 2023 alone. Interventions in the Greater Kasai provinces, South Kivu and Kinshasa show that 89 percent of people are still free of open defecation one year after, suggesting that results are sustainable. In addition, 2,5 million people gained access to basic hygiene and sanitation services. With respect to gender, UNICEF is also building capacity for the government to prioritize safely managed sanitation services and has engaged women-led associations to support families in accessing loans to improve their sanitation facilities.

Every child has an equitable chance in life.

In 2023 UNICEF continued its evidence-based advocacy efforts to strengthen the financing of basic social services for children. In partnership with the Ministry of Budget, UNICEF held a political dialogue with more than 80 Members of Parliament and Senators on the financing of social services, after which UNICEF and the Ministry of Budget identified the main bottlenecks contributing to low budget utilization in line ministries and developed concrete actions to address these constraints. Furthermore, technical support from UNICEF and other UN agencies was instrumental in the preparation of a national child related SDG report highlighting progress achieved for children as well as the challenges that must be overcome to reach 2030 targets. A national roadmap of key, actionable and child-sensitive reforms to accelerate progress towards SDG in DRC will guide priority interventions for children at the 2030 horizon.

Humanitarian results

In 2023, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Humanitarian Action and National Solidarity to enhance the country's preparedness and response capabilities by extending the national surveillance system currently covering 24 of the 26 provinces. Mainly through USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) funds, UNICEF and its partners continued to deliver a timely life-saving rapid response (UniRR), addressing dynamic vulnerabilities caused by population movements. UniRR emerged as a critical responder, swiftly providing life-saving assistance to nearly 750,000 internally displaced individuals, including 465,000 children. With a response occurring within an average of six days from needs-assessment, UniRR is the fastest mechanisms of its kind in the country. These interventions ensured delivery of essential household items and WASH kits, improving the overall conditions of vulnerable populations.

Health and education structures continued to be a target with 85 schools and hospitals attacked in eastern DRC (verified by the UN monitoring system). Despite this persistent insecurity and displacements, UNICEF and partners contribute to improve children access to health and education. Nearly 380,000 people (including close to 250,000 girls and women) were provided with primary health care services while in education over 175,000 children (85,000 girls) accessed formal and other learning opportunities.

Beyond the three eastern provinces, UNICEF has been delivering multi-sectoral humanitarian aid and emergency responses, spanning various sectors such as water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), child protection, health and nutrition, education as well as shelter. This effort aimed at addressing the needs of most affected populations notably in Mai Ndombe and Tanganyika in response to inter-community violence, Kalehe in response to landslides, and Sankuru, Haut Lomami, and Haut Katanga in response to a cholera outbreak. As such nearly 800,000 beneficiaries gained access to a minimum of 10 liters of water per person per day through the rehabilitation and construction of spring catchments, boreholes, water network extensions, or water trucking. In addition, through the cholera rapid response, UNICEF effectively reached 3,3 million individuals (including 91 percent within 48 hours of case notification) emphasizing the effective response in containing the transmission of cholera. This rapid response included the distribution of cholera kits, household decontamination, and hygiene promotion sessions,

significantly curbing the disease's transmission.

UNICEF also initiated a long term "Cash+" nutrition program in Tanganyika province, aiming to support 60,000 beneficiaries over three years. This innovative approach links malnutrition prevention with treatment, fostering household resilience against future shocks. Furthermore, UNICEF introduced rapid response cash transfers, providing flexible assistance to households and piloting mobile money transfers for 1,367 households in Tanganyika. The launch of the "Cash+" Gender Base Violence Prevention program was a significant milestone in UNICEF's efforts in DRC. This initiative, developed in collaboration with the World Food Programme, aimed to minimize the risk of gender-based violence by addressing the urgent basic needs of girls, boys, and women. Enrolling the first cohort of beneficiaries in December 2023, the program delivered cash transfers to 34,863 individuals in South Kivu Province. To accompany the scaled-up emergency response in eastern DRC, UNICEF strengthened sector leadership through the deployment of cluster support at provincial level allowing more efficient coordination of education, child protection, WASH and nutrition humanitarian response.

Cross-Cutting and Management Results

In 2023, UNICEF continued building on community engagement as a change strategy to reach the most vulnerable families and children. More than 5,7 million people were reached through face-to-face communication via 43,000 community structures and actors. Communities remains at the core of UNICEF interventions, and they were instrumental in regularly visiting vulnerable families, informing and raising their awareness of essential family practices, acting as the first line of epidemiological surveillance, and establishing community feedback mechanisms.

UNICEF continued also to implement and monitor its 2023 Annual Management Plan, applying information and communication technology tools to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of systems as well as enhance program impact. A digital solution powered by RapidPro was developed, using entry-level phones and SMS to track nutrition intrants and the admission of malnourished children in health facilities.

Improvement of supply chain effectiveness, harmonizing and simplifying internal processes while maintaining a high level of emergency preparedness and response capacity to support the corporate emergency response was also among the management priorities, resulting in \$ 68 million USD of local procurement and nearly \$ 238 million USD in offshore supplies and services. This represents an increase of 13 percent versus the previous year. UNICEF procurement services (including those procurements held on behalf of the DRC Government) played a critical role in improving access to essential products for children, with a particular focus on the strategically essential supplies to reduce under-five mortality (including vaccines, safe injection materials, cold chain equipment, micronutrients, therapeutic food amongst others).

Innovative initiatives such as “zero tolerance against fraud within communities” were implemented through the widely known U-report platform counting more than 6 million U-reporters. The platform was used to disseminate and access information about fraud and to report fraud incidents from basic phones and even without internet connectivity. Likewise, UNICEF has zero tolerance against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA). The declaration of corporate emergency in the East of the country within the context of a protection crisis has led to expanding the coverage of community-based complaint mechanisms for reporting SEA from 12 to 15 provinces. In addition, innovative means to communicate messaging on the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) were co-created with communities in local languages, including a comic book targeting adolescents. As of November 2023, more than 1,5 million persons had access to safe mechanisms for reporting SEA, including nearly 900,000 (444,979 girls). The number of allegations reported to UNICEF in the DRC in 2023 rose by over 50 percent compared to 2022.

At institutional level, UNICEF and partners supported the government to strengthen its PSEA accountability. Main examples include the Ministry of Health instituting its own complaint hotline and developing a PSEA policy and code of conduct while, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Action and National Solidarity passed a circular note on its PSEA obligations and that of its personnel.

In 2023 UNICEF DRC strengthened its level of performance on Gender Action Plan (GAP) institutional standards, in terms of gender analysis, gender transformative programming, staffing and capacity. For example, gender investments represent 19% of the DRC 2023 total budget spent on gender mainstreaming across sectors.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF leveraged partnerships with sister UN agencies (WFP, OCHA, UNHCR, UNFPA, IOM, WHO, FAO) to scale-up the emergency response in eastern DRC as the humanitarian community remained under-equipped to adequately respond to the major escalation of needs. On 16 June, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator activated a humanitarian systemwide scale-up for Ituri, North Kivu, and South Kivu. Initially for three months, the scale-up was then extended until the end of December. The enhanced partnerships with WFP ensured a more comprehensive response for newly displaced people by coordinating the delivery of food assistance in parallel with lifesaving interventions supported by UNICEF. Another significant milestone was the successful launch of the "Cash+" Gender Base Violence Prevention program in the South Kivu province, again in partnership with WFP. This partnership aims to minimize the risk of gender-based violence by addressing the urgent basic needs of girls, boys, and women.

In the fight against the several cholera outbreaks DRC has witnessed in 2023, UNICEF and WHO continued to collaborate closely to improve surveillance, early detection, and prompt response

strategies. Leveraging their respective strengths, these agencies supported the government's efforts to prevent the spread of cholera, improve sanitation, and ensure community health in cholera hot spots. The synergy of interventions reflects a joint commitment to mitigating public health crises in the DRC.

UNICEF also participated in the UN inter-agency - Capacity for Disaster Risk Reduction (CADRI) - mission to identify opportunities to mitigate the impact of cyclical emergencies which will focus on Kinshasa, Equateur, North Kivu and Tanganyika which will continue into 2024.

In 2023, UNICEF DRC mobilized \$ 400 USD million to address critical children's needs through development and humanitarian interventions; \$ 204.9 USD million for development efforts and US \$137 million in humanitarian funding. The top five donors to UNICEF DRC were the World Bank, USAID, the European Union (EU), Canada and Germany, with the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) being the top donor for flexible funds. The funding from key partners such as the EU, Korean Cooperation, Germany, and SIDA enabled UNICEF to significantly improve its multi-sectoral interventions in collaboration with other UN agencies, particularly FAO and WFP, under the Joint Resilience framework, greatly facilitating consolidation of peace after MONUSCO's withdrawal from areas prone to interethnic conflict such as Tanganyika and Kasai. While the CERF (Central Emergency Response Fund) funding was instrumental in scaling up multi-sectoral humanitarian response as humanitarian situation deteriorated and cholera epidemic broke out.

UNICEF also sustained a robust partnership with the Ministry of Health and the World Bank, serving as the preferred partner to support the government's initiatives to strengthen its systems and deliver services for vulnerable communities and children through various interventions including immunization (vaccines procurement and cold chain strengthening), food security (prevention and treatment of severe malnutrition) and sanitation (sustainable access to basic services in schools and hospitals).

Persistent constraints to private sector development - weak governance and regulation amongst others - hamper the emergence of a solid private sector considerably limiting private partnership opportunities. The UNICEF DRC private sector strategy focused on leveraging initiatives already implemented by the private sector (Equity Bank, Vodacom, Rawbank, Tenge Fumgurume) to maximize impact for children while drawing on UNICEF expertise to provide technical support including data, indicators, and a programmatic approach. The interventions in the peri-urban area of Kinshasa in support of the promotion of the sanitation market are an interesting example of this collaboration. This effort is carried out by women's and youth groups aiming to eradicate open-air defecation through access to commercial bank loans via Equity BCDC, with UNICEF serving as guarantor.

To strengthen youth inclusion and participation, UNICEF DRC launched the "Young Champions programme" in partnership with the United Nations Volunteers Programme. Forty young people were

offered the opportunity to acquire professional experience for a period of 3 months in UNICEF's field offices. The 40 Young Champions (aged 18 to 31) supported UNICEF to deliver its mandate. Some main successful activities include, leading social mobilization during vaccination campaigns in indigenous pygmy communities, promoting environment's protection in schools, empowering youth in conflict-affected provinces in eastern DRC through peace activities and creating the groundbreaking "U-Report community" in displaced camps. The programme has proven to be an incubator for young talent, a springboard for career in service of humanity and more importantly, 65% of these youth have secured jobs serving children and their communities after their assignment.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Facilitating post-conflict return and stability

In Tanganyika province - specifically in the area of Nyunzu - UNICEF collaborated closely with the provincial government to advance the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus, uniting diverse stakeholders to prioritize shared objectives to prepare for the return of displaced communities through durable solutions. The successful implementation of the HDP Nexus approach, including joint planning and response, involved the DRC Government, UN agencies, international and local civil society organizations, indigenous community representatives, and donors.

In piloting durable solutions for internally displaced, returnees and host populations, UNICEF fostered the conditions for return and improved access to basic services, resilience and inter-community trust. Mediation, conducted by the UNICEF-supported peace partner (ILC), resulted in a peace agreement between ethnic groups, while activities such as peace education, youth trainings, sports and cultural events, and community action plans further built social cohesion. The involvement of local administrative authorities, leaders, and influencers in accelerating peace brought a high level of authority to the process and fostered local ownership. To accompany these peace outcomes, UNICEF delivered a package of multi- and intersectoral interventions to targeted communities, including improved retention in schools, better access to health, birth registration, psychosocial support, safe drinking water and quality nutrition. Joint interventions with WFP, FAO and UNHCR maximized impact by exploiting the comparative advantages of each agency. For example, as part of the joint resilience strategy with WFP and FAO, UNICEF entered a new "cash+" nutrition programme in Tanganyika for 8,000 vulnerable, displaced people and their host communities to address basic needs and access essential services using mobile money. This will allow continued support for vulnerable households and communities while boosting resilience against potential future shocks.

Accelerating from immediate life-saving response to durable solutions

An ambitious ECHO-funded WASH programme in Bushagara, on the outskirts of Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu, provides another example for improved resilience through nexus approach and durable solutions. In this programme, UNICEF supported the expansion of the municipal water network to serve the vulnerable population of the Bushagara displacement site and the nearby host communities, demonstrating that humanitarian interventions can effectively have long-term developmental impact. In doing so, UNICEF and partners replaced costly water trucking (serving roughly 24,000 people at \$ 43,000 per month) and provided 150,000 people with reliable and sustained access to water – effectively extending the municipal water grid and connecting this area in a more durable way and making a real difference for children and women. Access to water at any time of day for drinking, cooking and washing empowers vulnerable population to live with dignity and equally importantly it mitigates health and protection risks in this fragile setting, especially for women and girls. The Bushagara water network will be further expanded through the establishment of more water distribution points, expanding reach to additional vulnerable communities and other displacement sites. This groundbreaking effort was not without its setbacks and challenges – extraneous factors including excavation through volcanic lava, supply chain disruptions and power line damage from the ongoing conflict, delayed implementation by several months. Nonetheless, this sort of durable and cost-effective solution contributes to local development, strengthening social cohesion in fragile and volatile settings where the tension between displaced populations and host communities is high.

Health system strengthening in Ebola-prone zones

UNICEF DRC supported health zones in Equateur province, where Ebola is endemic, through resilience and system strengthening interventions to better equip medical facilities for a durable response to public health emergencies. During the 11th (2020) and 14th (2022) Ebola outbreaks in Equateur, the Integrated Analytics Cell (CAI), in partnership with the Ministry of Health, monitored the relationships between the availability, accessibility and prevention control capacities of healthcare services and communities, analyzing how these contributed to Ebola risk mitigation. 25 percent of interviewed communities cited distance and cost to reach Ebola Treatment Centres - as a constraint on access and willingness to seek care, contributing to the risk of community transmission. Additionally, 54 percent of healthcare workers cited the limited capacity for isolation and decontamination in routine healthcare facilities as a key barrier to the prevention of nosocomial infection, contributing to the risk of transmission within medical structures. With World Bank funds, UNICEF supported a package of services including water, sanitation, waste management and technical training in 42 targeted healthcare facilities to reduce community risks and transmission through improvement and use of healthcare services. Data showed that in 2023, healthcare workers self-reported capacity to prevent nosocomial infection by 88 percent in the supported facilities, while healthcare workers in non-supported facilities reported a lack in training, equipment and water necessary for infection prevention control. Community leaders cited locally available and improved health services as motivating factors for use and drivers for care seeking, while previously these were cited by the communities as key barriers. In 2024, this approach will be replicated in North Kivu, another Ebola prone province in a more challenging context of insecurity and instability, which may hinder or delay the results witnessed in the Equateur province.

Improving through evaluations

UNICEF continued to invest in the evaluation and monitoring of its programs to assess progress, challenges and bottlenecks via three evaluations carried out in 2023. Firstly, the evaluation of the programmatic convergence approach showed more results with efficiency gains, as the approach gives the opportunity to address children deprivations in multiple dimensions through integrated interventions. Secondly, the evaluation of community development structures (CAC) pointed out their crucial role in achieving high-impact and cost-effective results. These community structures clearly facilitated the adoption of good practices and innovations that emerged while delivering programs for children. Finally in the area of humanitarian response, the evaluation related to multisectoral approaches to epidemic response showed that the decentralization of the response to the health district level strengthened the responsiveness and facilitated appropriation by local actors. UNICEF will use the findings and recommendations of the evaluations mentioned to optimize its future interventions, to ensure more impactful and cost-effective outcomes for the children in the DRC.