

Ukraine

Update on the context and situation of children

The prolonged war in Ukraine continues to have devastating consequences for the country's children. War has heightened children's risk of poverty, disease, family separation, learning loss, mental health, violence, including gender-based violence (GBV), trafficking and unexploded ordnance. Already lasting over 22 months, the war has left 2.92 million Ukrainian children, including 1.5 million girls, in urgent need of assistance. In total, 531 children have been killed and 911 injured (United Nations-verified data). A third of Ukraine is now contaminated by explosive remnants of war, posing a daily threat to children, especially boys and men who make up 90 per cent of those injured or killed. According to a 2023 UNICEF survey, 29 per cent of mothers feel unsafe in their current locations. This number rises to 41 per cent in frontline communities. Across the country, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports more than 3.7 million people (629,000 children) are internally displaced, while 4.6 million (782,000 children) have returned to their places of origin, including 1.4 million (238,000 children) who have returned to the east and south. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that an estimated 2.9 million people (493,000 children) are living in the 1,000 km frontline along the south and east and non-government-controlled areas, facing intense shelling, damaged housing infrastructure and severe constraints to their basic needs including water, electricity, education, and health services.

Because of the war, the poverty level in Ukraine is estimated to have grown from 39 per cent in 2021 to 60 per cent in 2022, with the share of children below the poverty line increasing from 43 per cent in 2021 to 65 per cent in 2022. The war has caused a 'poverty shift', with groups of relatively well-to-do households suddenly falling below the poverty line. New vulnerabilities include households affected by the destruction of housing and infrastructure, sudden forced displacement, loss of income sources and property. Groups who are traditionally vulnerable – including families with children with disabilities, three or more children, or children under three, as well as single parents – are now frequently below the extreme poverty line. In a UNICEF study of 9,000 mothers, 59 per cent reported receiving no social assistance for their children; and 57 per cent identified financial assistance as their most critical need.

Children are socially isolated, intensifying mental health concerns. An October UNICEF survey found 56 per cent of parents in eastern regions saying their children are sometimes or often anxious or tense. The upheaval of war has made even more tenuous the situation of displaced children, those unaccompanied and separated, living in institutions and children with disabilities – including those now returning from the countries to which they had fled.

Of the 3.837 million children enrolled in Ukrainian schools, nearly two million, more than 50 per cent, remain reliant on online or blended education, with 2,321 schools across the frontlines closed for safety reasons (November 2023, Ministry of Education and Science (MoES)). As of December 2023, 3,714 educational facilities had been damaged and 392 destroyed: representing 13 per cent of all education infrastructure (Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA) 3, February 2024). The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results indicate a deterioration in 15-year-old students' learning acquisition since 2018, equivalent to almost two years of skills loss in reading literacy (PISA Ukraine Report, December 2023). Thus, with COVID-19 and subsequently, the war, many children have entered their fourth year of disrupted education with significant learning losses.

Fighting has destroyed over 1,000 km of water networks across Ukraine (Kyiv School of Economics, March 2023). The national water and sanitation system – 40 per cent of which was in critical

condition before the full-scale war due to decades of underinvestment and poor maintenance (World Bank, 2021) – is on the brink of collapse. In addition, up to a million people lost access to sustained, safe water after the destruction of Kakhovka Dam and many were still reliant on water trucking in December.

By January 2024, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), since the full-scale war began, 1,434 attacks on health facilities had been verified, affecting 1,267 health facilities. Attacks on energy infrastructure in the winters of 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 have led to power outages that interrupted water networks and access to health and education services and raised the already extremely high risks of acute respiratory diseases, seasonal influenza and waterborne diseases. Children in Ukraine faced cases of measles and Hepatitis A in 2023; these children are at particular risk due to low immunization rates, with WHO reporting only 69 per cent of children receiving their second dose of measles vaccine in 2022.

The war affects women disproportionately, as caregivers and frontline workers are largely women (87 per cent of teachers and 83 per cent of health workers are women). Women are more likely to be unemployed (State Employment Service), rely on unstable sources of income (REACH snapshot), have an increased burden of unpaid domestic and care work (Rapid Gender Analysis), and have less earnings than men for work of equal value (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine). Women's care responsibilities for children and dependent family members (elders and sick people) have increased due to family separation through displacement, social and health services disruption, remote/online schooling, etc. Women make up 92 per cent of all single parents, in turn responsible for 20 per cent of all households. This has resulted in increased levels of unpaid care work, stress and reduced opportunities for income generating activities or leadership participation, particularly challenging for women with restricted mobility, including older women, women with disabilities, and female caregivers with limited access to paid employment.

Major contributions and drivers of results

Humanitarian action

In 2023, UNICEF Ukraine further continued the 2022 'zonal approach' as frontlines became static, and no significant territory changed hands. In the frontlines, the East and South, UNICEF provided urgent humanitarian support and access to social services.

Within 30 kilometers of the frontlines, UNICEF participated in all 100 inter-agency convoys, providing life-saving assistance to 385,400 people, alongside mobile health and child protection services, and cash assistance.

UNICEF reached 55,335 households (193,589 individuals; 101,541 children) with cash assistance. Each individual received US\$180 from January to November to cover basic needs, and \$292 from December. UNICEF was also successful in reorienting the humanitarian cash transfer (HCT) programme towards field-based delivery, with field offices and local partners improving the targeting of vulnerable populations.

The United Nations Secretary General activated the full monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM) in his July Annual Report. In August, the United Nations and the government signed a Joint Prevention Plan to End and Prevent Grave Violations Against Children in Ukraine, as a voluntary government commitment to ensure the protection of children during the armed conflict. Since its signature, the government – coordinated by its Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) Focal Point – has demonstrated strong dedication to ensuring the implementation of the plan, with support from United Nations agencies, including UNICEF, as co-chair of the Country Task Force on Monitoring

and Reporting.

Through community engagement UNICEF reached 8,061,496 children, young people, and caregivers with explosive ordnance and risk education. Additionally, 48,346 children affected by explosive ordnance in frontline areas were reached with case management services.

UNICEF responded to critical water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) needs, ensuring access for 4,504,321 people, specifically focusing on repairing and rehabilitating water and sanitation networks. This effort, 82 per cent in rural areas, included delivery of essential equipment to 50 utility providers. UNICEF's lifesaving humanitarian response reached 1,877,394 people, including 315,466 children, through the provision of bottled water, water trucking, water purification tablets, hygiene kits, generators, and other essential non-food items. Following the Kakhovka Dam destruction, a water trucking operation was immediately deployed to cover urgent water needs in Kherson, Marhanets, and Nikopol cities, as their water intakes, relying on the Kakhovka reservoir, were no longer operational. Nearly 320,000 people received life-saving support and over 1,000,000 people were reached with messages on safe water practices.

Mobile Spillo Spots were rolled out within 24 hours to support families during evacuation in Kherson and Mykolaiv after the Kakhovka Dam destruction. Two seasonal behavioural change campaigns addressed critical safety concerns, each reaching over 11 million people, including a special focus on adolescents, promoting safe behaviour in various settings.

In collaboration with the MoES, UNICEF supported 20,000 young children living in frontline areas with an adapted early childhood education programme, the only in-person pre-primary support available for young children and their parents. Under the auspices of a national Digital Device Coalition, UNICEF provided 48,785 digital learning devices to students unable to access in-person learning, particularly focusing on displaced children, children without parental care and children in low-income families. To strengthen digital device management capacities at the MoES and support the national roll out of curriculum reform efforts, UNICEF procured Mobile Device Management software as a means of monitoring the usage of digital tools. Recognising that home-based learning has placed parents on the frontlines of their children's learning recovery, UNICEF expanded support to online parental engagement portals – notably the NUMO platform, which reached over 4 million individuals, and over 540,000 website users, with information, advice, and resources to use in support young children's learning and development.

With UNICEF support, 4,926,077 children and women in Ukraine accessed essential primary health-care interventions in UNICEF-supported facilities and through mobile teams. Additionally, 115,600 pregnant women, children and caregivers received health-care services from home visits and Spillo Points (child-friendly spaces) across Ukraine.

Contingency planning and emergency preparedness actions by the Country Office and Field Offices, including pre-positioning of stock, enabled UNICEF to provide life-saving support to over a million affected people, including safe water, hygiene supplies, health consultations, psychosocial support and cash assistance. This was put into action when a winterization response was needed, and UNICEF supported over 1.5 million people between September 2022 and March 2023 with children's winter clothing, blankets, water heaters, space heaters, and generators to ensure continued functionality of water systems, health centres and schools.

UNICEF, in collaboration with the Ombudsman for Human Rights, supported the cross-border family tracing and reunification process and directly assisted 67 children from 48 families in Ukraine through case management services. Despite limited access to certain areas, UNICEF continued to advocate expedited identification, tracing, and reunification, citing successful reunifications across control lines.

In line with the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, UNICEF Ukraine promoted gender equality across sections and by supporting civil society and government partners in evidence-based research, including gender analysis.

Nexus recovery

Working closely within the Government of Ukraine's national recovery agenda, and with the United Nations Country Team under the umbrella of the United Nations Transitional Framework (2022-24), UNICEF's recovery and policy support focused on ensuring children- and youth-centered recovery programming through systems strengthening, support to critical services, and evidence-based programming for child rights. Ukraine's accession process to the European Union (EU) and the linked Ukraine National Plan also presented key opportunities for UNICEF to support the government to center child rights in the legislative, policy and institutional frameworks of the reform agenda.

This was demonstrated in the childcare and deinstitutionalization agenda, re-launched by the Government of Ukraine and UNICEF with European Commission financial support advocating every child's right to grow up in a safe, nurturing family environment. This effort materialized in the Better Care reform initiative and the establishment of the Coordination Centre for Family Upbringing and Childcare Development of Ukraine in August. Through the Coordination Centre, UNICEF enabled the drafting of a National Road Map on Better Care Reform and the National Strategy on Ensuring the Right of Every Child in Ukraine to be Raised in a Family Environment. This comprehensive approach towards EU alignment— informed by more than 550 stakeholders through public consultations and international expertise – was presented to the Cabinet of Ministers in November. UNICEF also initiated two models for recovery and reform in Kharkiv and Volyn Oblasts, paving the way for a scalable decentralized action, now being adopted by eight more participating oblasts.

In collaboration with the MoES and partnership with 53 local implementing organizations, UNICEF enabled 1.3 million girls and boys – 45 per cent of the national education sector target – to access continuous learning opportunities. As a critical pre-condition for the re-opening of education institutions, UNICEF's support for infrastructure rehabilitation and refurbishment allowed for the re-opening of 63 kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools. UNICEF's technical support for the development of national education infrastructural designs and guidelines, including shelters, will ensure the availability of standardized inclusive and child-centred facility designs for local authorities to rapidly respond to their rehabilitation priorities. In line with the government's National Recovery Plan, UNICEF ensured safe WASH facilities for children in 368 schools, 105 health-care facilities, and 3 internally displaced person centres reaching about 131,900 people (at least 36,122 children).

Given the impact of protracted school closures on student learning outcomes, UNICEF supported the development and implementation of a national learning recovery strategy, aiming to mitigate learning losses. Through these efforts 56,648 children were engaged in various modalities of remedial education interventions - spanning individual and group tutoring activities, the establishment of Digital Learning Centres and skills building of children and over 5,000 teachers on digital learning capacities. Significantly, 78 per cent of children participating in catch-up programmes had improved learning scores following their involvement in the programmes.

UNICEF prioritized needs-based support in the settlements with the greatest WASH gaps, fostering collaboration with water utilities and local authorities. Notably, the partnership with Kherson City Water Company supported the reconstruction and rehabilitation of water supply and sewage networks, benefitting 93,600 people.

UNICEF, with the support of partners, reached 1,487,505 children with mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and enhanced capacities of 35,000 child protection, 8,000 education

and 3,000 health-care professionals in MHPSS. This included 11,036 children with disabilities, 617,049 mothers and 193,904 fathers and 19,227 individual peer-to-peer counselling sessions (16,369 female; 2,140 non-binary). Using the Adolescent Kit in the youth centres platform 67,642 young people (35,122 female, 24 with disabilities) were reached on mental health. As a part of the First Lady's initiative on MHPSS, 50 individuals from key institutions – including the Office of the President, line ministries, the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs, and the National Police – were trained on effective communication for MHPSS, and 1,982 health-care professionals received training on providing psychological support for adolescents and youth, on trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorders.

UNICEF supported the government to rehabilitate shelters in 21 hospitals, with a total catchment population of 450,000 children and pregnant women, focusing on the primary health-care provider and home capacity to ensure better quality services are accessible for vulnerable groups.

UNICEF technically supported the Ministry of Health to implement family-centred integrated models of care and improve vaccine logistics and vaccine storage system nationwide, this included inventorying the cold chain equipment and identifying knowledge gaps in Ukraine. As a result, 1,395 refrigerators were procured and delivered for vaccine storage, and 6,450 health-care professionals responsible for the cold chain were trained in accessible regions of Ukraine. Furthermore, 3,726,434 people reached with critical vaccination messages within the "Protect Your Close Ones" multi-media campaign on routine immunization. At the subnational level, UNICEF strengthened service delivery models in 12 regions and more than 155 home visits through the home-visiting model. Additionally, the UNICEF-supported National Hotline on Vaccination and Infant Feeding provided over 414,977 consultations since July 2022 and 180,000 individuals, including health-care professionals, benefited from online educational events, enhancing knowledge on medical care, health-care resilience, and children's health in conflict.

UNICEF also sustained and advanced prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. With UNICEF's technical support at primary health-care level 984 HIV-exposed children underwent early infant diagnosis and with 992 receiving post-contact treatment. 135,900 women underwent HIV testing, with 895 women living with HIV undergoing viral load testing. Collaborating with United Nations partner agencies and local organizations, UNICEF supported 118 internally displaced women living with HIV, 53 pregnant women, and 365 women from vulnerable groups.

UNICEF strengthened its commitment to evidence-based humanitarian and recovery programming in 2023 through its contributions to the second and third RDNAs (in which it led the WASH and education chapters); the Kakhovka Dam Post Disaster Needs Assessment; and the Common Country Assessment (in which it led the social development chapter). UNICEF also conducted several evaluative exercises, including two investment cases on ECD and Youth, a study of humanitarian cash transfer programming and significant engagement in the evaluation of UNICEF Ukraine's emergency response.

To increase young people's participation in their communities and contribution to both humanitarian and decentralized recovery efforts, UNICEF scaled up the implementation of the UPSHIFT entrepreneurship intervention, reaching 33,552 young people. UNICEF, the MoES, and the Junior Academy of Sciences have signed an agreement to integrate the UPSHIFT methodology into extracurricular learning.

Following the damage to youth centres due to the war, UNICEF supported MoYS and subnational partners to maintain youth spaces in Mykolaiv (3), Odesa (1), Poltava (1), Kirovohrad (4), Kharkiv (3), Zhytomyr (1), Chernihiv (1), and Lviv oblast (16). In partnership with YouthUP NGO, capacity building and seed funding were provided for young people to establish youth spaces. Twenty-two organizations were reached, in turn reaching 53 youth centres and spaces. YouthUP trained 538 youth

workers and reached 12,360 young people (8,645 females).

The U-Report intervention was scaled up to reach approximately 134,000 users across Ukraine (with 43,000 new users in 2023), with the results informing the development of social sector policies (including on volunteerism, diversity and inclusion), on campaigns (such as on climate change prior to COP 28) and programme design (such as a national programme on GBV). This scale is explained by the mobilization of young people through interventions in U-Points, campaigns and events, and the rolling out of a school volunteering programme with U-Report support. A pilot school lesson on volunteering reached 34,470 adolescents. UNICEF and the Ukrainian Volunteer Service engaged 264 volunteers and 153 organizations and maintained the National Volunteering platform visited by 300,000 users with 7,990 subscribers to volunteering initiatives.

Policy Support

UNICEF's support for the finalization of a National Strategy on Inclusive Education and the National Action Plan will allow for greater resources and support from government and non-governmental organizations towards inclusive education services. UNICEF's pilot programme on assistive technology, equipping children with complex disabilities with eye-tracker devices and providing technical guidance, successfully demonstrated how Inclusive Resource Centres and local authorities can collaborate to successfully include children with disabilities in schools. In total, 440 teachers were empowered to create inclusive learning environments in kindergartens and schools. Furthermore, 4,557 in-service and pre-service physical education teachers were supported to deliver inclusive sports sessions within formal and non-formal education settings.

For longer-term impact, UNICEF as the lead United Nations agency, supported USAID, ECHO, DFID, United Nations partners and the Ministry of Social Policy (MoSP) to accelerate the PeReHID Initiative, a multi-stakeholder partnership to facilitate the transition from HCTs to shock-responsive social protection. UNICEF is also focusing on energy efficiency, climate adaptation, water quality, and monitoring to meet EU standards. This includes working on regulatory documents, a water tariff study, and a technical assessment of water quality and monitoring in Ukraine.

At policy level UNICEF supported MoYS in establishing the Ukrainian Youth Fund (UYF), including launch of the UYF-led project, aligning with the European Reinforced Youth Guarantee to support young people's transition from learning to earning including, access to the labour market, skills-building and meaningful volunteering.

UNICEF supported MoSP in humanitarian and development social protection coordination mechanisms, opening spaces for engagement, collaboration and leveraging financial resources for children. UNICEF and MoSP research enabled the ministry to secure a \$24 million national budget allocation for a social services pilot. MoSP facilitated the Government Decree for UNICEF to receive beneficiary data from the national social protection system for HCTs, enabling the provision of winterization cash for 4,860 households (20,813 individuals; 14,867 children).

Drivers of results

In 2023, UNICEF developed the capacity of local authorities to implement gender- and shock-responsive public finance for children in eight target municipalities. These municipalities have since established strategic working groups to implement gender-responsive programming and budgeting for children.

UNICEF also took a leading role in addressing gender-related concerns, with 1,105,241 girls, boys, and women who were survivors or at risk of GBV receiving essential life-saving services. Strategic partnerships with national women's rights organizations have mainstreamed GBV and PSEA through

all interventions, multiple tools and training packages (Gender in Humanitarian Action training; GBV risk mitigation training, PSEA training) and prevention, risk mitigation, and response through safe spaces and multidisciplinary teams, particularly in eastern and southern Ukraine. Now 448 implementing partner staff know how to design and implement gender programming in humanitarian action and 284 are aware of PSEA; 318 frontline workers were sensitized on gender discriminatory roles and practices; and 80 local authority representatives (72 women) on gender-responsive budgeting. In total, 652,657 targeted beneficiaries and staff received information about safe and accessible channels to report sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers with clear explanations and referral mechanisms, through communication campaign, training, face-to-face, SMS, hygiene kits, visual materials, and within UNICEF supported facilities. In addition, major results were achieved on the Oky App for adolescent girls accessing easily to information on menstrual health and hygiene, including GBV and gender stereotypes components. The App was launched on iOS and Android, and has reached about 30,000 girls aged 9-16 and parents. Emotional stories about women and quotes about the active role of women as caregivers and frontline workers in society had the highest reach on UNICEF's social media. Content about misogyny and debunking gender stereotypes worked better for the younger audience (Instagram). In general, well-chosen content formats and topics enabled UNICEF to reach 240,000 unique users.

UNICEF continued strengthening its Accountability to Affected Populations. The "Tell Us as It Is" feedback hotline, dedicated exclusively to UNICEF beneficiaries, registered 9,006 unique calls. The hotline was developed in a series of co-creation and feedback sessions using human-centred design engaging 258 people.

UNICEF launched its Young People Advisory Board (YPAB) with 20 members from around the country, including minority ethnic groups, and persons with disabilities. YPAB members participated in initial country programme development, led youth-monitoring sessions, and attended high-level national and international events (on mental health, climate, youth participation and gender).

UNICEF enhanced capacity for behavioural change in government bodies responsible for health, education, social policy and emergencies, with 535 staff enabled to create behavioural change communication content, engage with communities, and deliver child-friendly sessions.

In 2023, 288 content packages were produced, each comprising a text story, photos and/or videos, highlighting the stories of children and families in Ukraine, the war's impact, children's rights, and the voices of children and young people. Media engagement for interviews resulted in widespread local and international media coverage of programmes and the impact of the war on children in Ukraine, including the Kakhovka Dam attack. Programmes supported by UNICEF Ukraine and partners were mentioned over 58,000 times in the media, and UNICEF Ukraine's social media channels had 2.25 million followers by December 2023.

In 2023, short, medium, and long-term staffing needs were identified, and UNICEF exercised the fast-track procedures in recruitment and staffing positions (an average speed of 25 days was achieved). The Country Office continued to develop an onboarding programme which encompasses welcome calls, country guides, one-on-one human resources briefings on arrival and induction for newcomers to connect and be introduced to the office programme and organization. The Country Office has developed a framework for wellbeing centered around individual counselling, group resilience training, Staff Wellbeing Committee initiatives, and occupational safety. The Country Office also developed a learning strategy for the period from 15 August 2022-31 December 2024, focused on organizational guidance, technical excellence, and resilience.

Engagement with the United Nations

UNICEF has worked closely with United Nations partners in Ukraine in 2023. UNICEF and other United Nations agencies, as well the government, are implementing the Joint Prevention Plan to End and Prevent Grave Violations Against Children in Ukraine. UNICEF is also working closely with other United Nations agencies to monitor and report on grave violations within the MRM. UNICEF led communications coordination for the release of the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict, advising the Resident Coordinator's Office and the United Nations Communication and Advocacy Group.

UNICEF has facilitated research on access to childcare and women's economic empowerment, reviewing family policies and costing the expansion of childcare system (with the International Labour Organization: ILO); supporting gender equality strategy in education (with the United Nations Population Fund: UNFPA); gender-responsive local budgeting (with UN Women); and is developing health worker gender capacity (with WHO).

UNICEF coordination

UNICEF's humanitarian response was closely aligned with government priorities, and local authorities had full ownership of the response. This was achieved through close dialogue with local authorities at oblast, district and hromada level. UNICEF field offices participated actively in General Coordination Meetings organized by local authorities and OCHA, conducted TikTok training for the Humanitarian Communication Group, and worked with media for to amplify key messages on programming for children.

UNICEF is an active member of the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group to identify local expertise on gender equality; strengthen gender in the interagency humanitarian coordination structures; and inform gender components of early recovery and transitional framework planning. UNICEF has coordinated the inputs for the WASH and the Education chapters of the RDNA 2023. UNICEF has acted as co-chair of the UN Operational Management Team, Data Task Force under the UN Programme Management Team and co-lead the Data for Solutions Group under the Community Planning Durable Solutions Recovery Working Group. Consulting with the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergency (INEE), UNICEF Ukraine also helped develop recommendations for student learning recovery in support of the MoES' efforts.

Sector leadership

Through its role as Cluster Lead Agency for Education, WASH, and Child Protection UNICEF played a key role in coordinating humanitarian actors. Through the WASH cluster, UNICEF worked directly with over 50 water utilities, and supported over 500 water utilities; this large-scale action-oriented partnership will help enable recovery in the WASH sector and strengthen local governance, inclusiveness and youth participation at the municipal level. UNICEF as the UN lead on shock responsive social protection managed and guided the multi-stakeholder PeReHID government, donors and UN partnership to facilitate the transition from HCTs to shock-responsive social protection. As part of the Health Cluster, UNICEF played a key role in managing maternal and child health work. UNICEF activated and coordinated the Health Cluster's Nutrition Technical Working Group to monitor nutrition status and develop a response strategy.

Engagement with civil society

Strategic partnerships with NGOs, academia, and the EU were critical to leverage resources and maximize impact on results for child protection in 2023, particularly as evidenced by the successful advocacy for the Better Care agenda.

With the Ministry of Youth and Sports and others, UNICEF has helped develop the Ukrainian Youth Foundation's regulatory framework to increase young people's opportunities in volunteering, skills development and economic empowerment. UNICEF will partner a youth-led civil society organization to support Lviv's preparation for European Youth Capital 2025. UNICEF also closely collaborated with young people through the Young People Advisory Board.

Engagement with other Ukrainian entities

Advocating for enabling environment and engagement for youth and adolescent mental health, UNICEF supported the Third Summit of First Ladies and Gentlemen (working with other United Nations agencies to produce a video for the summit), as well as World Mental Health Day, and the National Mental Health Forum. With the First Lady-initiated National Programme on Mental Health, a mental health awareness campaign for caregivers and children reached 5.3 million people.

UNICEF has engaged with Ukrzalizntzia, the national rail company since 2022. The partnership has provided improved services for children on the move, increased the visibility of Spilno spots, and generated positioning for recovery. Every second child travelling by train visited Spilno spots at Kyiv, Lviv, Kharkiv, Kherson, or Mykolaiv train stations.

To support systems and policies, UNICEF built relationships with the national gender machinery, aligning key interventions with the government priorities focused on the State Strategy on Equal Rights and Opportunities of Women and Men and the European Union accession process. In cooperation with the Government Commissioner on Gender Equality Policy, line ministries, and United Nations partners, UNICEF supported studies on access to childcare, the gender pay gap women's economic empowerment, and family policies, supported the gender equality strategy in education (with UNFPA), facilitated gender-responsive local-level budgeting at local level and developed the gender capacity of health workers.

Engagement with humanitarian and development partners

UNICEF, in-country and globally, raised significant funds for work in Ukraine, securing 57 per cent of its humanitarian appeal of \$829 million and securing multi-year development funding for recovery activities. Beside fundraising efforts and submitting over 35 funding proposals, UNICEF engaged in technical and senior-level meetings, facilitated 30 visits for institutional partners and National Committees, and submitted 180 donor reports on time. A strategic partnership was initiated with the EU – including providing early recommendations for the EU Enlargement report published in November. The Kakhovka Dam incident and the development of the Winter 2023/2024 Plan were critical moments for relationship building.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

Reaching young people for education

UNICEF has worked with MoES and local partners to ensure safe and continuous access to learning for all children and adolescents during the crisis through multi-layered interventions. Education programming now increasingly prioritizes sustainable interventions designed for long-term impact, to ensure that these models are retained and endorsed in the country. By integrating effective practices, this approach ensures continued learning access to education and meaningful outcomes.

The ongoing displacement of people presented logistical challenges for field operations, exacerbated by security risks and unpredictability. Adaptable service delivery models were crucial for addressing

diverse needs in different areas. However, children's access to schools remains problematic, prompting many institutions to adopt and persist with online learning or blended learning. Security concerns and conflict also led to delays in conducting technical assessments.

One key lesson learned pertains to the importance of targeted interventions, focusing on rigorous selection criteria to identify and prioritize the students in greatest need. Pre-test and post-test assessments have proven instrumental in gauging the effectiveness of catch-up sessions, providing a data-driven approach to educational support, and is crucial for understanding the long-term impact of catch-up programmes. This forward-thinking approach is intended to ensure the sustained effectiveness of such interventions and help guide future educational strategies.

In addition, higher isolation of children resulting – among other factors – from online learning, has immensely increased the need for psychosocial support, emotional learning and recreational activities that promote interaction between children. A whole school approach which includes school directors, principals, and support from the external professional team for the provision of psychosocial support has appeared to be useful for increasing communication and facilitating dialogue within the school and in family settings. This has showcased the need to scale up psychosocial support through an integrated whole school approach and positive parenting sessions.

Better Care reform

A key achievement in 2023 was the Better Care initiative – an intensive government childcare reform agenda that UNICEF supported from conceptualization until roll out. In 2023, early investment in Better Care, including targeted advocacy, demonstrating UNICEF's technical expertise, and built strong partnerships with government entities, ensured UNICEF was seen as the partner of choice for the reform. Better Care was linked crucially with humanitarian response, and enhanced focus on particularly vulnerable children and women (including children with disabilities, children in frontline areas, children and women at risk of and survivors of violence, and children in alternative care).

The Better Care initiative was launched at a timely moment with strong commitment from the highest political level of the Government of Ukraine, and in line with the country's recovery plan and EU accession. While previous attempts have been made to reform the childcare system in Ukraine, Better Care introduces an innovative approach, with a dedicated coordination body established to lead the reform process and ensure coordination across ministries at national and sub-national level, alongside technical materials, concepts, tools developed and supported by UNICEF. In addition, the Better Care initiative introduces several means to engage and nurture the knowledge, motivation and commitment from technical, mid-level and senior-level government officials and experts, NGOs and others through national and sub-national consultations, study visits, international experts' consultation and advice, among other means. As a result, the process has shown promising engagement and commitment from all levels to ensure that every child lives in a healthy family environment.

Decentralization

In 2023, UNICEF further decentralized its programmatic response and field operations. The results demonstrated that empowering field offices with necessary resources, systems, and authority – alongside close alignment with national policy and technical support from national teams – ensures rapid and effective humanitarian response and contextualized child-centred recovery response. Effective coordination with local authorities, at oblast and hromada level, including for the prioritization of geographic areas, has resulted in a focused in an integrated nexus – recovery programme, in line with local government priorities. Focusing efforts on priority hromadas has resulted in UNICEF positioning itself as a preferred and reliable partner for recovery in priority locations.

The decentralized structure, preparedness, close coordination with national teams and supply repositioning, especially before the Kakhovka Dam was destroyed, was critical for the emergency response demonstrating a much-improved coordination capacity as compared to the general disorganization that followed the war's escalation; contingency planning enabled an immediate response while putting in place broader coordination mechanisms. Local partners and civil society were critical for last-mile distribution, especially for populations staying behind or returning to newly accessible municipalities close to the frontline.

Decentralization brings new opportunities and challenges. For example, in the recovery programming it was found that co-creation, leadership, coordination, capacity development and knowledge sharing with local authorities at hromada level is crucial, alongside regional partners at oblast level. Local municipalities, oblasts and hromadas have taken ownership of the recovery plans, including leading the interventions and allocating resources (financial and human) within a very difficult context. Greater capacity at local level has also enabled new activities, such as introducing gender-responsive budgeting methodology in local municipalities, which will inter alia increase the gender responsiveness of social protection programmes at local level.