

# UNICEF EGYPT



## EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN EGYPT



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unicef   
for every child

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What is one of the best ways a country can boost shared prosperity, promote inclusive economic growth, expand equitable opportunity, and end extreme poverty? **The answer is simple: Invest in early childhood development.**

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## SEIZING A CRUCIAL OPPORTUNITY

What is one of the best ways a country can boost shared prosperity, promote inclusive economic growth, expand equitable opportunity, and end extreme poverty? The answer is simple: Invest in early childhood development.

– Nurturing Care Framework, UNICEF and WHO

Early childhood encompasses three distinct stages: from conception to birth, from birth to 3 years of age, and the preschool and pre-primary years.

A child's early development is a continuous process of acquiring skills and abilities that are crucial for her current well-being and future. During this period in a child's life, the brain develops rapidly – across the domains of cognition, language, motor, social and emotional development. The skills and abilities acquired help the child to think, solve problems, communicate, express emotions and form relationships. They form the foundation of lifelong health, learning, productivity, well-being and the contribution to better and more prosperous societies.



## INVESTING IN CHILDREN AT THE START OF THEIR LIVES IS THE RIGHT AND SMART THING TO DO.

### THE RIGHT THING TO DO

- Every child has the right to grow up healthy and strong.
- Every child deserves access to quality early childhood education.
- Every child has the right to be protected from violence, abuse, neglect, and exposure to other adversities.
- Every child has a right to live in an environment that is conducive to his or her growth and safety, including being protected from pollutants and other hazards.



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For these reasons, UNICEF is working with the Government and other partners to redouble efforts in the Early Childhood Development programme in Egypt. The goal of the programme is that all young children, especially the most vulnerable, from conception to the age of school entry, achieve their developmental potential. This is enabled in two ways:

- All young children have equitable access to essential quality health, nutrition, protection and early learning services that address their developmental needs.
- Parents and caregivers are supported and engaged in nurturing care and positive parenting with their young children.

### THE SMART THING TO DO

The financial case for investing in children's early lives is strong. The rate of return on investing in early childhood programmes is estimated to be about 14 per cent.<sup>1</sup> The benefits are reaped in improved outcomes in education, health and other areas. Investments in children's early development can lead to better incomes for children when they eventually join the workforce as adults – up to 25 per cent higher than what they would have earned without such investment in their lives.<sup>2</sup> Investing in early childhood development also benefits a country as a whole, supporting the creation of a more skilled workforce that is better prepared to take on the challenges of a global and digital economy.

Investing in early childhood development is affordable: for example, for an estimated average of \$0.5 per person annually, a country can add programmes for families with young children to existing health and nutrition services.<sup>3</sup>

The return on investment in early childhood programmes is huge. The return for children is invaluable: a fair chance to thrive and develop to their full potential.

<sup>1</sup> García, Jorge Luis, et al., "The Life-cycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program", Human Capital and Economic Opportunity Global Working Group, Working Paper 2016-035 (Chicago, December 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Gertler, Paul, et al., "Labor Market Returns to an Early Childhood Stimulation Intervention in Jamaica", Science, vol. 344, No. 6187, 30 May 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Richter, Linda M., et al., "Investing in the Foundation of Sustainable Development: Pathways to scale up for early childhood development", The Lancet, series 0140-6736, vol. 16, 4 October 2016.



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## THREATS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN EGYPT



The early years of life offer an unparalleled opportunity to support young children to grow and thrive. But far too often this opportunity is squandered.

For Egypt, the potential lost opportunity is sizeable: close to 40 per cent of children under 5 years of age – around 5 million – are at risk of not achieving their full developmental potential.<sup>4</sup>

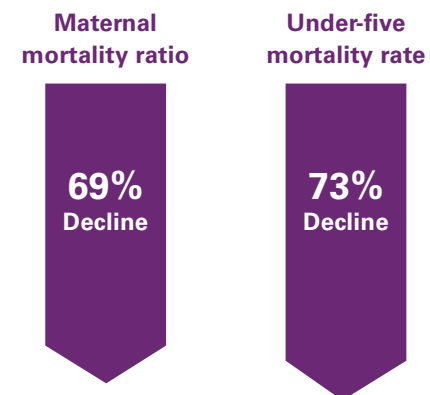
The biggest threats to the optimal growth and development of children are poor health, inadequate nutrition, lack of caregiver capacity to protect, support and promote young children's development, lack of early learning opportunities, extreme poverty, violence at home and in the community, and exposure to environmental pollutants. Threats to a child's early development tend to cluster together. So being exposed to one risk usually involves exposure to many.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF Egypt estimate based on the prevalence of stunting and the poverty rate.

### Child health has improved, but inequity remains

Years of concerted efforts have yielded tremendous gains in tackling maternal and child mortality.

#### Decline in mortality between 1990 and 2015 in Egypt



Progress in child survival has remained uneven, however. For example, compared to children growing up in the wealthiest households, the poorest children are more than twice as likely to die before reaching the age of 5.<sup>5</sup>

Progress in reducing neonatal mortality (i.e., death within the first 1 month of life), has been slower; as a result the share of neonatal deaths relative to all under-five deaths has increased to 52 per cent. Focusing efforts on the critical periods before and immediately following birth is essential to saving more lives.

#### Children face a triple burden of malnutrition

The faces of malnutrition in Egypt are changing, revealing a triple health burden: persistent stunting, increasing wasting, and rapidly rising rates of overweight among children.

- **Stunting – low height for age** – affects more than one in five young children in Egypt. Stunting diminishes the cognitive ability and learning capacity of children, limit-

ing the ability of young people from poor households to grow out of poverty.

- **Wasting – too thin for height** – results from disease and a lack of proper nutrition, weakening the immunity of children and placing them at increased risk for developmental delays. In Egypt, some 1.1 million children under the age of 5 suffer wasting.
- **Childhood obesity** in Egypt has increased at an alarming rate, which is now one of the highest in the world. The number of overweight children under the age of 5 is close to 2 million.

#### Too many children lack organized early learning opportunities

In Egypt, more than half of all pre-primary schoolchildren are not enrolled in early childhood education programmes (preschool or kindergarten).

Furthermore, children have uneven access to early childhood education opportunities:

The richest children are 4 times more likely than the poorest to attend early childhood education programmes. Boys are more likely than girls to attend these programmes. The gap between the number of boys and girls enrolled is 8 per cent, though the gap has decreased in the past decade. For children who do have access to early childhood education, poorly trained educators, overcrowded and unstimulating environments, and unsuitable curricula diminish the quality of their experiences.

#### Widespread safety and security hazards threaten children

In Egypt, close to 12 million young children are exposed to violence, especially gender-based violence, one of the country's most pervasive violations of human rights. Even in the first formative years of life, children are exposed to severe physical punishment – one third of

children 1 to 2 years of age have been hit or slapped in the face, head, or ears, and/or have been beaten up.

Moreover, many young children live in areas where the air is toxic, exceeding international limits by as much as 8 times. Air pollution and similar forms of environmental hazards can break down critical elements of a child's developing brain, leading to the loss and damage of neural tissue, among other long-lasting effects.

#### Children do not receive adequate care

Only half of the parents in Egypt<sup>6</sup> are engaged in activities that stimulate a child's development. Moreover, fathers are rarely engaged in childrearing. This lack of early stimulation can have lifelong consequences.

#### Human, financial and organizational resources for young children are limited and of poor quality

Inadequate and/or inappropriate policies and legal provisions, compounded by limited enforcement of existing provisions, constrain families' access to resources. Moreover, resources to support existing policies and legal provisions are in many cases suboptimal. The health sector allocation in the state budget, for example, is equivalent to just around 3 per cent of the country's gross domestic product.

For Egypt, the price of inadequate investment in early childhood development is children who are likely to have poorer health, fewer learning skills and reduced earning potential as workers later in life. For children, especially children from disadvantaged communities, the price of this failure is lost potential, some of it gone forever.



<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all data presented in the brief are extracted from the Egypt Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), published by the DHS Programme and the Ministry of Health and Population (Cairo, 2014). <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR302/FR302.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> "Health, Nutrition and ECD Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices", Center for Development Services (Cairo, June 2019).





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If we change the beginning of the story, we change the whole story.



– Nurturing Care Framework, UNICEF and WHO

Giving a fair chance in life to every child – especially the most disadvantaged children, those from the poorest households, girls, children with special needs, children on the move, and those living in remote areas – offers the greatest opportunity to break the intergenerational cycles of inequity and poverty in Egypt.

UNICEF supports the Government initiatives in this area, including Vision 2030, which has made early childhood development a priority. Embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals on hunger, health, education and justice are key targets on malnutrition, child mortality, early learning and violence. The Government has already pledged to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with the Ministry of Health and Population, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Solidarity, and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood leading sectoral and cross-sectoral actions. UNICEF assists this effort by leveraging partnerships, and by engaging the private sector and media to strengthen a clear agenda for young children that supports their development while also supporting families.

Actions by UNICEF Egypt focus on three strategies:

### 1. Lead and invest

UNICEF takes the lead among its development partners to identify high-impact interventions for investment in early childhood development and to showcase results for possible scale-up.

#### What we accomplished:

- **Assisted the Government in revising the health sector's Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan**, bringing more emphasis to the critical issue of child nutrition and a renewed focus for action.
- **Engaged the Government and other stakeholders in developing the National Early Learning and Development Standards**, the first ever in Egypt, which will establish a system to monitor and assess children's development, and inform health, nutrition and early learning practice and policy.
- **Produced an Investment Case in Nutrition**, in partnership with the World Bank, paving the way to increased budgetary allocations for the most effective and efficient interventions to reduce stunting.
- **Reviewed and improved the neonatal mortality surveillance system** in Asuit governorate. The lessons learned from the review and corrective measures taken to improve the system were shared with the Ministry of Health and Population and are being used to improve the mortality estimates nationwide.
- **Conducted cost simulations of Early Childhood Development centres** that allowed identification of the most cost-effective models for Egypt, thereby providing a solid foundation for national scale-up.
- **Contributed resources and expertise to the Positive Parenting Formative Research initiative**. The research, which is currently being finalized, provides the first-ever evidence on the number and content of parenting programmes active in Egypt and will help to assess their effectiveness and define future direction.

### 2. Focus on families and communities

UNICEF delivers evidence-based, strategic support for behaviour change and social change within families and communities. Working with the Government, civil society organizations, influencers, media and the private sector, UNICEF employs a mix of social mobilization, advocacy, and behaviour- and social-change strategies to promote child survival, development, protection and participation. UNICEF also invests in positive parenting and girls' empowerment as drivers of behavioural and social change.

#### What we accomplished:

- **Increased access to essential health services** through mobilization of community health workers, volunteers and community-based organizations in promotion of maternal and child health and nutrition. UNICEF intervention in nine districts, populated by many of the poorest families, resulted in a threefold increase in the utilization of essential services, including antenatal care, post-natal care, growth monitoring and promotion, and initiation of exclusive breastfeeding.
- **Supported the Government in building communication systems to promote key drivers of change**. This included the participatory design of a Social and Behavioural Change Communication Model on parenting. Components included:
  - » A face-to-face parenting programme, reaching the most vulnerable families
  - » A real-time information system providing parents with essential health and other information
  - » A television drama modelling parenting behaviours promoting early childhood development nationwide
  - » Toy-Making Festivals to engage parents and communities in producing toys with recycled materials to promote early stimulation for children.

Implementation of this model, through all its components, is expected to shift social expectations and practices, including the key role of fathers in childrearing.

UNICEF EARLY  
CHILDHOOD  
DEVELOPMENT  
ACTIONS AT A  
GLANCE

- **Harnessed the power of the private sector** (e.g., partnerships with SEKEM, AXA and others) to invest in early childhood development and to give support to their employees so that they benefit from early childhood development services.
- **Facilitated large-scale awareness-raising and advocacy initiatives** leveraging digital and media platforms. For example, the first-ever interactive Parenting Month was launched online in June 2019 to highlight the importance of parents' interaction with their children, such as playtime and storytelling. The campaign also advocated for family-friendly policies, including childcare services and paid maternity and paternity leave. By late 2019, Parenting Month had reached 12 million people on Facebook and 329,000 on Instagram. The 2019 multimedia campaign #IAmAgainstBullying, supported by the European Union and in partnership with Uber, Carrefour, Metro Market, Kheir Zaman and Oscar, engaged national celebrities, media and communities. The campaign achieved a reach of 100 million people and engaged 4.5 million – showing that the issue of bullying is a wide-spread concern. The number of phone calls to Child Helpline increased four times after the campaign, revealing the great demand for services to address the issue of violence.
- **Developed and distributed health cards for each newborn (2.5 million a year)** at birth, informing parents about growth and developmental milestones and core interventions in health, nutrition and early childhood development, including measures to stimulate responsive feeding and caregiving.

### 3. Strengthen services

UNICEF develops the capacity of service providers and strengthens essential services as a first step to improve the lives of young children and their families.

#### What we accomplished:

- **Increased capacity of health managers** at national and decentralized levels through training on results-based management. Jointly reviewed managers' annual workplans and introduced a system for using data in monitoring the implementation and adjustment of these plans.
- **Updated the health information system.** As a result, the Ministry of Health and Population and its partners can better track key indicators on child nutrition and early childhood development.
- **Revised the manuals, protocols and guidance for the health workforces** (doctors, nurses and community health workers) and started training of health professionals. This helped to update the knowledge of health workers on maternal and child health, nutrition and early childhood development.
- **Contributed to transforming Primary Health Care.** The Government of Egypt has made universal health coverage and improvement in the quality of health services a national priority. Quality primary health care is critical for achieving universal coverage. UNICEF provides technical and financial support for transforming this level of care, focusing on needs at every stage of the life cycle. UNICEF and WHO provide support to the Government in critical areas of the primary health-care system: governance, leadership and financing; improving the capacity of the workforce; and promoting community engagement in the design and implementation of services.

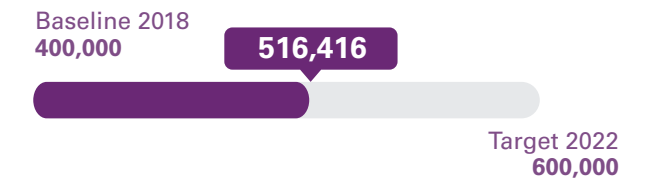


## RESULTS FOR CHILDREN:

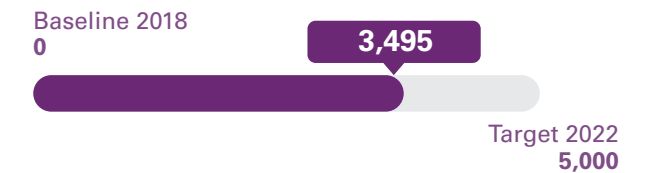
midway in the journey

Progress in achieving key results for young children in Egypt through the 2018–2022 UNICEF–Egypt Country Programme of Cooperation, as of July 2019.

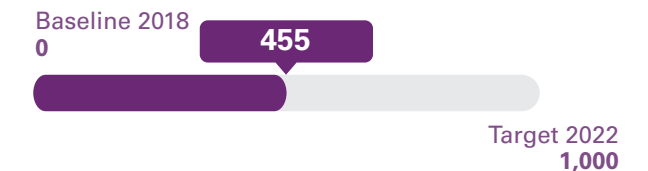
Babies born safely at health facilities through UNICEF-supported programmes



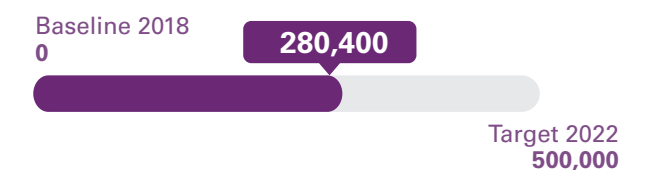
Skills enhancement of health service providers through UNICEF-supported programme



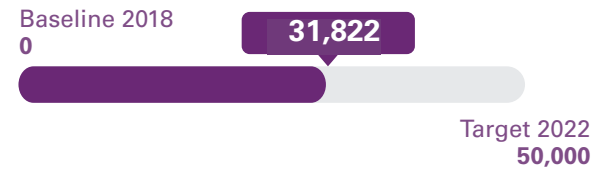
Community health workers and community volunteers trained to efficiently serve the health needs of their communities



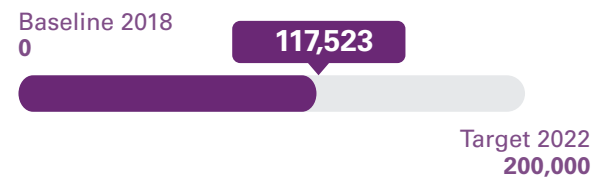
Families reached with health communication messages (counselling services) through UNICEF-supported programmes



Children reached with early childhood development services

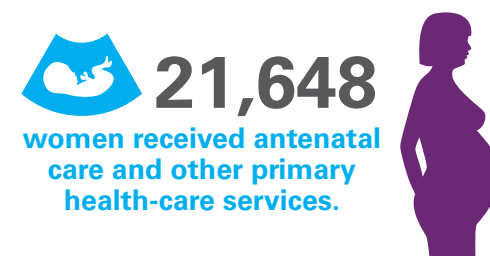


Children and community members engaged with content related to parenting, including fatherhood



were reached on social media during the Parenting Month campaign in June 2019

In humanitarian situations, support for refugees, asylum-seekers and migrant children (children on the move) and women:



## THE WAY FORWARD

Supporting the Government's efforts to provide children in Egypt with a solid start in life is a top priority for UNICEF. This is made more challenging by the fact that population growth continues to increase the number of children living in poverty and in households where they are exposed to physical discipline, poor nutrition, limited stimulation and environmental hazards.

The Government is implementing bold reforms to tackle extreme poverty and to better redistribute domestic resources. These positive trends will help to break down barriers that young children face in reaching their full potential.

UNICEF has the comparative advantage to propel forward this Government agenda. Its advantage includes both technical expertise to support child rights and the convening power to work with development partners, the private sector and communities towards the achievement of common objectives.

Building on the results achieved so far, UNICEF will focus its actions on the following areas:

- Expand strategies, plans and budgets to foster the development of children. The first step is to develop a comprehensive Early Childhood Development Strategy and Costed Action Plan.
- Leverage partnerships for children to make family-friendly policies a national priority – and a private sector imperative.
- Advocate to embed child health, nutrition, safety and responsive caregiving in basic benefit packages for universal health coverage and primary health care.
- Contribute to national multisectoral coordination mechanisms and a national road map for nutrition and early childhood development.
- Generate new evidence to advocate for greater and better investment in children, and empower citizens, communities and civil society organizations to participate in relevant decision-making and budgeting processes.
- Scale up the most cost-effective home-based and community-based early childhood services, ensuring that children from the poorest and most vulnerable families benefit the most.
- Strengthen and invest in quality antenatal care, skilled care at birth, postnatal care for mother and baby; expand quality services for small and sick newborns; engage communities to participate in and demand quality newborn care; and strengthen measurement to count every newborn and stillbirth.
- Scale up the interventions that work best in addressing the triple burden of malnutrition and that bring the greatest return: protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding; promotion of adequate complementary foods and feeding practices; and micronutrient supplementation.
- Transform primary health care, taking the lessons from successful pilot programmes, such as that in Port Said, to reform primary health-care services nationwide.
- Monitor the fidelity and quality of programme implementation to identify barriers to improving coverage and impact, and continuously adapt programming to become more effective.
- Institutionalize and scale up the implementation of the Social and Behavioural Change Communication Model on parenting, and strengthen related strategic partnerships.

The Government of Egypt has pledged to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and deliver on its promise to make early childhood development a priority. Placing early childhood development at the top of the economic and political agenda is a key step required to translate this pledge into action. Now is the time to support such action.



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