



UNICEF on Care and Support

including Family-Friendly Policies

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Background

UNICEF demonstrates an institutional commitment to the care and support agenda as reflected in its 2022-2025 Strategic Plan, the Nurturing Care Framework, the 2022-2025 Gender Action Plan, the 2022-2025 Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy, the Global Social Protection Framework, the 2022-2030 Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy, and the Strategic Approach to Children's Rights and Business (2022-2025).

UNICEF has conducted a comprehensive stocktaking analysis of its work on care and support, including family-friendly policies (FFP), in all country contexts from 2020 to 2024.

129 UNICEF Country Offices from all regions in the stocktaking exercise, including 22 that completed the survey questionnaire and 11 that engaged in key informant interviews. The findings of the report are based on both qualitative and quantitative analyses. Specifically, UNICEF investigated:

1

What have been the contributions and interventions of UNICEF in Care and Support including FFP-related work between 2020 and 2024?

2

To what extent is Care and Support, including FFP-related work, is integrated into UNICEF's plans?

3

What are some impactful case studies from UNICEF's interventions?

What are Care and Support, including FFP?

- ★ Care work encompasses **the provision of assistance through various stages of life** and includes a broad spectrum of activities and responsibilities that promote the well-being of individuals, particularly children, older adults, and persons with disabilities.
- ★ Support refers to **the delivery of tools, services, and skill-building initiatives** that enable individuals – especially those with disabilities and older persons – to live independently and with dignity.
- ★ Family-friendly policies constitute **measures and arrangements designed to help employees effectively balance work and family responsibilities, while also supporting the health, development, and well-being of their children.**

Why are they important?

1. **Enable lifelong well-being.** Without strong national care and support policies and systems, children and adults who require assistance often face unmet needs and heightened risks of violence, social exclusion and institutionalization.
2. **Alleviate family burden.** In the absence of public support, individual households shoulder all costs and time commitments for care and support, creating unsustainable strain and significant opportunity costs.
3. **Advance gender equality.** Women and girls spend 3.2× more time on unpaid care than men, limiting their education, formal employment, and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Surge in Care and Support reporting across Country Offices

There is a clear upward trajectory in the number of UNICEF Country Offices reporting work on care and support, including familyfriendly policies, over the past four years.

After a relatively stable baseline between 2020 and 2021, UNICEF's work on care, support and family friendly policies has exponentially increased from 2022 onward. This sustained growth was supported by multi-sectoral work at UNICEF providing targeted expertise and advocacy at the global, regional, and country levels.

What is UNICEF's Work on Care and Support?

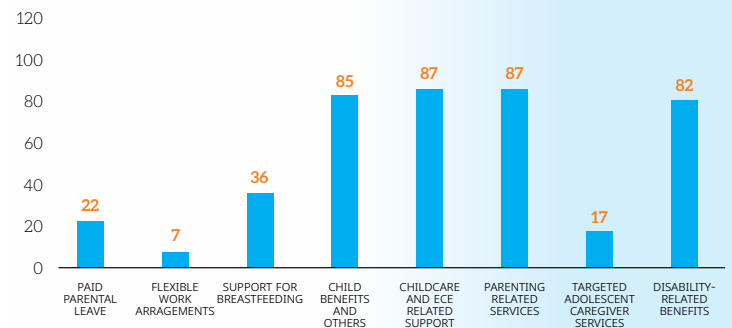
Most of the analyzed Country Offices reported work on **childcare and early childhood education (87 offices)**, **parenting-related services (87)**, **child benefits (85)**, and **disability-related support (82)**, underscoring UNICEF's work on service delivery and social protection interventions. By comparison, a still significant but smaller number of Country Offices have been supporting **paid parental leave (22)**, **breastfeeding support (36)**, **flexible working arrangements (7)**, and **targeted adolescent caregiver services (17)**, highlighting opportunities to further scale-up advocacy and programming in these areas from a strong base. This distribution reflects UNICEF's child-centered and crosssectoral approach while illustrating the need for further work on specific care and support policy areas.

Over 2020–2024, UNICEF worked mostly on **programme implementation (115)** and **technical assistance to governments (113)** on care and support. Substantial engagement also occurred in **research, data, and evidence generation (81)** as well as **goal setting and policy development guidance (63)**, highlighting UNICEF's strategic role in shaping national care and support agendas. Beyond government partnerships, many offices reported **business engagement** by launching trainings, workshops, and developing business guidelines and toolkits, and **policy advocacy (59)**, **collaborations with civil society (41)** and **other international NGOs (50)**, alongside **advocacy (55)** and **capacity-building (26)** work, illustrating a multi-stakeholder approach to influencing both policy and practice across care and support systems.

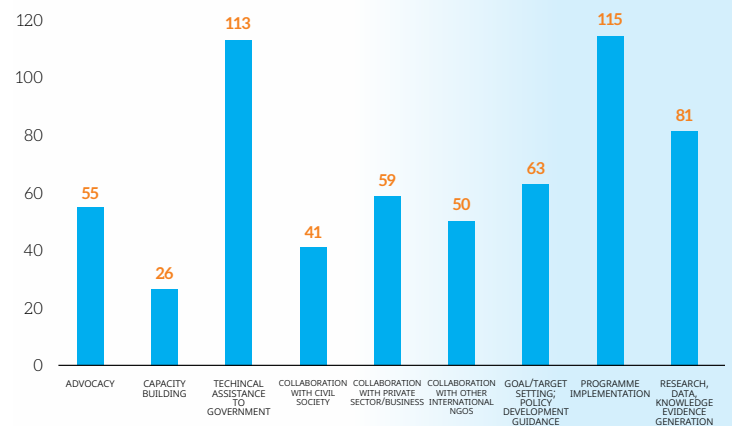


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Figure 2 A high level of engagement can be seen in a number of policy areas during 2020-2024
Number of country offices mentioning work on different policy types - COARs and CSIs combined, **2020- 2024 all years** (i.e. if the country office carried out work in at least one of these years)



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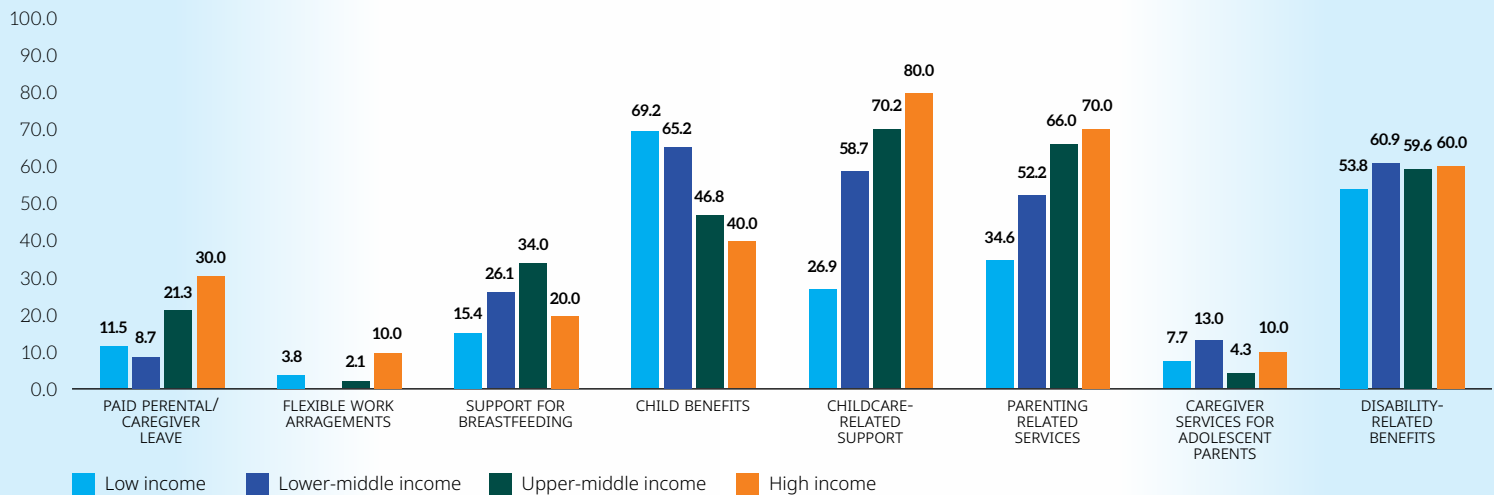


What Are The Differences Across Regions And Income Groups?

A regional analysis shows distinct priorities, with **Latin America & the Caribbean Region** and **the South Asia Region** working predominantly on childcare and parenting services; **the Middle East & North Africa Region**, as well as **the Eastern Europe & Central Asia Region** focus primarily amount of work on disability benefits; **the East & Southern Africa Region** focuses more on cash based child support schemes; and **the East Asia and Pacific Region** places a stronger emphasis on paid parental leave. **The West and Central Africa Region** has reported its highest levels of

engagement in child and disability-related benefits. When grouped by income levels, **low-income countries depend largely on social transfers** - such as child and caregiver benefits - whereas **upper-middle and high-income countries invest more heavily in childcare and parenting supports**. Disability-related interventions enjoy consistently strong emphasis at every income tier, while paid parental/caregiver leave, flexible work arrangements, and caregiver services receive comparatively little attention.

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Across every region, over 70% of the reporting Country Offices are working on **programme implementation and technical assistance to government**. Regional discrepancies are more pronounced for other intervention types:

Area	Region	Status
Business engagement	Latin America & Caribbean; East Asia & Pacific; South Asia	Strong engagement, including launching trainings, workshops, developing business guidelines and toolkits, and policy advocacy.
Civil society collaboration	Europe and Central Asia	Most pronounced collaboration with civil society organizations.
Collaboration with international actors	South Asia	The highest levels of collaboration with other international NGOs and multilateral actors.
Goal/target setting and policy guidance	East Asia and Pacific; Latin America and the Caribbean; South Asia	Highest levels of work reported.
Research, data & evidence generation	East and Southern Africa; Middle East and North Africa; West and Central Africa	Needs further investment.

Across all income groups, programme implementation and technical assistance to government remain the most frequently reported activities. This consistent high engagement reflects UNICEF's fundamental approach to both delivering services and strengthening national systems. Other types of engagement, however, show more variation depending on the country's income level:

Business engagement: This type of intervention **increases with a country's income, peaking at 50% in upper-middle- and high-income contexts.** This is likely due to the presence of more formalized labour markets and better entry points for implementing workplace-related care and support policies in these settings.

Research, Data, and Evidence Generation: These activities are **significantly more prevalent in high-income settings (70%) compared to low-income countries (42.3%).** This indicates a need for greater investment in data availability and evidence generation to inform care and support policy development and scale-up in lower-resource environments.

What are the Challenges?

This agenda faces a range of financial, institutional, and sociocultural barriers at country level:

- ★ **Limited funding and resources** are the most frequently cited challenges, underscoring how financial constraints can hinder both service delivery and policy engagement.
- ★ **Restrictive social norms and expectations** emerged as the second most common barrier, underscoring how entrenched gender and societal norms can hinder progress in advancing care and support systems.
- ★ **Data and evidence gap** also emerged as a major challenge—particularly in less developed regions—reflecting limitations in collecting the information needed to advocate for, design, and scale effective care and support interventions.



What can UNICEF continue to do?

- 1 Broaden and deepen policy coverage.** UNICEF should continue to expand its care and support efforts across all country contexts, with particular attention to areas that remain under-addressed. A comprehensive care systems approach—integrating laws, policies, institutional mechanisms, services, cash transfers, workplace reforms, and shifts in social norms—should be promoted globally to ensure cohesive and inclusive support structures. Marginalized groups that are particularly in need and for whom there are significant coverage gaps – including adolescent girls and children with disabilities – should be prioritized.
- 2 Strengthen resource mobilization.** Care and support priorities should be more fully integrated into UNICEF's resource mobilization strategies by aligning with cross-cutting funding streams, including those focused on gender equality, disability inclusion, and early childhood development.
- 3 Expand Monitoring and Data Systems.** UNICEF should scale up the use of standardized monitoring indicators and improve data comparability across countries. Existing tools should be strengthened to better capture under-represented care and support interventions.
- 4 Enhance evidence generation.** Invest in research and data collection on care and support policies— especially in low-income countries—to inform program design, advocacy, and accountability. This includes improving the availability of data on both public and private sector initiatives at global and regional levels.