

## Situation and Programmatic Monitoring in the context



# UNICEF Egypt's experience with phone-based surveys during COVID-19

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for every child

On 28 March 2020 in Cairo, Egypt, a girl looks out the window with her mother while staying at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## Abstract

UNICEF Egypt gathered information on child and family wellbeing in the context of COVID-19 during a lockdown through conducting surveys by phone for the first time. Four repeated cross-sectional surveys were conducted over the period of eight months. Results guided the response by UNICEF, other UN partners, and the Government of Egypt (GoE).

UNICEF contracted a nationally respected research firm to provide technical expertise in phone-based surveys. The Real Time Monitoring (RTM) surveys covered a nationally representative randomized sample of 1,500 families every other month over eight months and included a small sample of refugee families. UNICEF regularly shared summary findings with the GoE and key partners and provided additional findings upon request. As a result, the GoE, development partners and other stakeholders were equipped with timely information about children and families during COVID-19 to guide the response over time.



## Lessons learned for consideration

**Be clear on the level of precision and accuracy needed when deciding on data collection methodologies.** The benefit of phone-based surveys in terms of access during the pandemic outweighed their limitations in terms of the reduced level of detail possible to capture with shorter, more closed-ended questions.

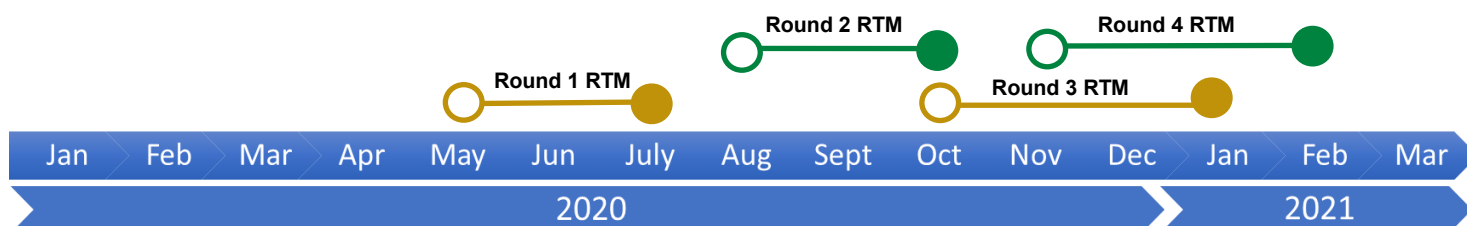
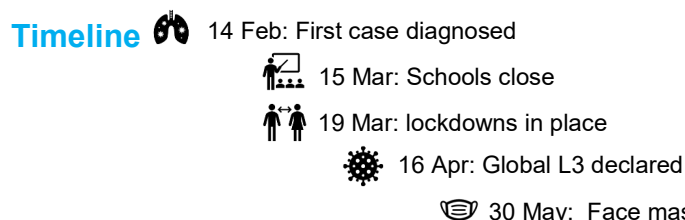
**Manage expectations around the time required to develop and deploy solutions.** It takes time to develop relevant materials to initiate data collection. It also takes time to learn and to improve with every round of data collection. This investment of time and effort is critical to support efficient and responsive data collection efforts when repeated over time.

**Ensure technical review and correction of translations when operating in the context of two or more lan-**

**guages.** Quality assurance of the translation of data collection tools and reports was done by the UNICEF office, which ensured conceptual clarity and accuracy.

**Complement the data with meaningful analysis.** Data does not speak for itself, and requires human expertise to translate figures into actionable analysis. UNICEF allocated human resource time to support relevant and clear analysis of the data. It took relatively more time to do so in the first round in comparison to later rounds.

**There can be benefits of working with established, regionally relevant agencies.** The local research partner maintained an extensive database of phone numbers, so there was no additional time required to develop the sampling frame before the sample could be made.



## Context

UNICEF’s programme in Egypt (2018-2022) focuses on addressing multidimensional poverty in Egypt through improvement of a range of basic services. Social protection, addressing disparities in the quality of and access to basic services for children, and strengthening the enabling environment of social norms for children’s rights are core areas of work.

The COVID-19 pandemic threatened to undermine Egypt’s macroeconomic progress and to push another four million people below the national poverty line. The size of COVID-19’s direct and indirect impacts depended on the progression of the outbreak, the type of measures taken by the GoE, the length that these measures would be in place, and the community’s response to these measures. Groups that were already vulnerable prior to the pandemic- including refugees and migrants, participants in the Takaful and Karama cash transfer programmes were of particular concern. For many, like workers in temporary jobs and the informal sector, the choice would be between having no income or exposure to COVID-19.

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Egypt on 14 February 2020. By the end of March, schools, restaurants and airports had closed and a curfew was in place. The number of new cases began to spike at the end of May, after containment measures eased during Ramadan. Soon after, Egypt’s COVID-19 fatality rate was one of the highest in the region.

### Box 1: Module content

#### MODULE 1:

- Education and learning of school-age children
- Employment status
- Income, expenditures and consumption status
- Refugee module

#### MODULE 2:

- Infant and maternal health and nutrition
- Child protection
- Adolescents and youth

The GoE response was led by the Prime Minister. Ministries were responsible for leading components of the response. The UN community was led by the Resident Coordinator’s Office (RCO) and guided by two plans. The Country Preparedness and Response Plan (CPRP) or “medical plan” focused on preparedness and response, while the Social Economic Response and Recovery Plan (SERRP) focused on secondary impacts of COVID-19.

## Actions taken

Evidence of the direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of families and children was needed to complement the GoE response focus on protection of economic stability. Generation of this evidence was included in UNICEF’s response plan and was shared with Ministries to support the GoE in designing responses.

The Social Policy Monitoring and Evaluation (SPME) team gathered information on methodological options and weighed several factors, including:

- **The likelihood that the situation would be volatile.** A single detailed snapshot through one assessment could very quickly become irrelevant as the situation changed. Repeated cross-sectional surveys capture trends in the situation over time.
- **Face-to-face data generation at population level in Egypt was often resource intensive with a long delay between data collection and final results.** Stakeholders would perceive results as out of date if, like previous Demographic Health Surveys, data was collected in one year and the analysis was available the following year. Information about children and vulnerable populations was needed as close to real time as possible to effectively support decisions in the response to COVID-19.
- **Face-to-face surveys were likely to be impacted** if movement restrictions were introduced.
- **Remote survey data collection by phone was a less resource-intensive alternative** that did not require the heavy preparations of field surveys. Time-intensive government regulations related to clearance for house-to-house surveys and data collection also did not apply to phone-based surveys or focus group discussions.
- **Remote data collection would limit the number and type of questions that could be asked.** Phone-based survey questionnaires need to be brief to take into account the shorter respondent attention span when administered by phone versus face-to-face.
- **Remote data collection had the potential to shorten the time between data collection and results.** With fewer questions overall and a larger proportion of closed-ended questions, the analysis process was likely to be lighter and faster than a face-to-face survey.

## Methodology development

Remote data collection by phone using fewer, closed-ended questions that could be made available with minimal time lag was seen as more fit-for-purpose than a face-to-face survey, though such surveys provide more statistically robust estimates. Four assessments over eight months were planned. A repeated cross-sectional survey approach was taken instead of a longitudinal approach (panel survey) because of a concern about the potential for high drop-out (attrition) rate. The method was referred to as the 'Real Time Monitoring' (RTM) tool. Results would be available within two to three months from the start of data collection.

The SPME team developed the questionnaire in consultation with UNICEF Programme Teams in the first week of April. Topics included children's access to education and learning, protection and mental wellbeing, employment status of family members, as well as access to services and adolescent and youth engagement. The questionnaire was split into two modules to balance the number of topics and limits in the length of phone-based surveys. UNICEF and UN Women also coordinated bilaterally to ensure that the RTM did not cover the same topics as UN Women had in its phone-based survey "[Women in the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)."

UNICEF advertised an institutional contract for the RTM mid-April 2020 because this was the first time that UNICEF undertook a phone-based survey in Egypt and technical expertise was required. In May 2020, UNICEF began working with The Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research (Baseera), a local agency established in 2012 and well known in the region.

## Methodology overview

- The survey was **targeted towards a total of 6.400 individuals drawn from households with children**. Details on a maximum of three children from each surveyed households were included for Education related questions because of the time constraints of phone-based surveys.

- The sample was designed to be **nationally representative** spread over all 27 governorates with a small margin of error; and a slightly higher margin of error at the sector (rural/urban) and three main geographical regions (Upper Egypt, Lower Egypt and Urban governorates).
- **Data disaggregation** included by sex, age, education level, and wealth.<sup>1</sup>
- There was a recognition that refugees may have already been more vulnerable, so a **small sample of refugee households was included**. The indicative nature of the data was thought to be valuable even if the refugee sample was not representative. Undertaking a representative survey would have taken much more time because of the additional challenge of generating phone numbers which were not readily available in the Baseera database.
- Landlines and mobile **phone numbers were randomly selected** from the Baseera database according to the respondents' region, gender and education. Each of the numbers was reached 4 times before it was considered as a non-response case.
- **Enumerators were trained** in administering the questionnaires and recording responses in the computer-

assisted telephone interviewing software developed by Baseera.

- Baseera monitored the quality of interviews and monitored how enumerators recorded responses. Feedback was given to the enumerators to address any shortfalls and prevent future mistakes.

## Results

RTM findings provided valuable information to UNICEF and the GoE to support response decisions. **Four rounds of the RTM were conducted**, covering about 6,400 respondents (June 2020-December 2020). The time between data collection to results was about 1.5-2 months.

RTM findings were shared within UNICEF, with selected partners in the GoE (e.g. Ministries of Social Solidarity Planning and Economic Development, Finance, Education, Health and Population), some national institutes like the CAPMAS (The National Statistics Office), National Council for Women, National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, selected academic institutions and UNCT members through the Resident Coordinator's Office. The RTM results were not made public at the time<sup>2</sup>.

RTM results **highlighted several impacts** on children and their families because of COVID-19. For example, the mental wellbeing of children and their parents was negatively



A girl reads with her father while staying at home during the COVID-19 pandemic in Cairo, Egypt. 28 March 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> A proxy was used to determine and categorize household based on their ownership of some fixed assets like an automatic washing machine and/or car or none of them. NOTE: The assets used to determine the wealth category of the household are not standard for Egypt based surveys. The standard method for determining wealth quintiles involves asking many questions that was not possible through phone-based surveys.

<sup>2</sup> A public report outlining methodology and findings is currently under development by UNICEF Egypt.



impacted and reflected in increased stress level and changes in sleeping patterns. Findings were used to shape the response, for example highlighting the need to monitor the impacts of the lockdowns on factors such as child labour and gender-based violence.

UNICEF's experience with RTM also **created opportunities for technical partnership**, for example technical inputs to UNHCR on their large-scale phone-based survey for refugees in 2020. The RC office used the RTM data in the Common Country Analysis which **will shape the new United Nations Partnership Development Framework**.

### What did it take?

- **Personnel to coordinate the RTM within UNICEF:** The SPME team was the focal point in the development and execution of the RTM.
- **Technical inputs from UNICEF Country Office:** All programmes were consulted on the questionnaire.
- **Technical assistance and guidance:** Data and Research colleagues in the Regional Office gave inputs into the TOR and reporting for the RTM. HQ guidance and resources on phone-based surveys (through webinars) came later and helped improve RTM from the second round.
- **Technical expertise:** An institutional contract with a nationally respected research firm with extensive experience in undertaking phone-based surveys and polls.
- **Financial inputs:** An estimated 95,000 USD for 4 rounds through reallocated resources. Many planned activities for the SPME team in support the National Statistics Office (NSO) for 2020 were put on pause by the NSO due to COVID-19.

### Enablers

- Previous investments by the office in diversification of partnerships and workstreams, investment in evidence generation, policy, action with SPME.
- Previous collaboration with the GoE and other agencies on data efforts, including the 2018 "Understanding child multidimensional poverty in Egypt" which was developed in collaboration with MoSS and CAPMAS and

ranked as one of the top three best UNICEF research in 2018

- UNICEF team dedication, Senior Management support and Regional Office collaboration.

### Challenges

- At the beginning of 2020, there was no experience on phone-based surveys in UNICEF Egypt.

### Next steps

Overall appreciation and confidence in data from phone-based surveys has increased in Egypt. While phone-based surveys will not unilaterally replace house-to-house surveys, they can be usefully applied.

RTM will support UNICEF's advocacy role and ground plans in a near real-time understanding of how people's lives are being impacted. Long Term Agreements (LTA) to undertake phone-based surveys have been established. UNICEF plans to undertake different rounds of RTM during 2021 and 2022 to support different programme areas.

The Ministry of Education and Technical Education requested UNICEF to support them in another set of 2 rounds of Education RTM in 2021 to understand if and how families with school age children are adapting to the new modalities of learning and education arising from COVID-19 pandemic. This request came as a result of the success of the RTM, in particular the quick turn-around in availability of estimates. UNICEF will also be acting as the UN coordinator for undertaking a national survey in 2021 with the GoE and CAPMAS to address data gaps on SDG indicators related to children.