

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past decade, Honduras has experienced a rise in poverty levels, with an increase from 67.1% in 2018 to 73.6% in 2021. Additionally, extreme poverty expanded from 42.9% to 53.7% in the same period¹. This situation has been exacerbated by various factors, including climatic factors such as tropical storms, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, collectively resulting in a 9% contraction of the economy². In this context, there has been a surge in violence, migration, and forced displacement, with repercussions on the protection and education of children and adolescents, negatively affecting educational access, permanence, learning levels, and the development of essential competencies. Furthermore, children and adolescents are more exposed to the risk of violence and abuse, particularly among the most vulnerable groups.

According to statistics from the Consular and Migration Observatory of Honduras for 2018-2022, of the total number of returnees, 16.5% were children and adolescents, placing them in a significantly vulnerable position associated with a heightened risk of school dropout and exposure to violence, with a more substantial impact among adolescents aged 13-17³. School dropout is also associated with violence; according to a 2018 study by the University Observatory of National and International Education - OUDENI⁴, 23.9% of girls and 14.0% of boys aged 13-17 reported dropping out of school due to physical violence, and 21.2% as a result of sexual violence.

The closure of educational centres and the limited ability to deliver virtual learning services in 2020 and 2021, a consequence of tropical storms and the ongoing pandemic, exacerbated the educational crisis. This setback undid years of progress in the country's academic coverage and quality, amplifying inequality and increasing vulnerability. Insufficient access to technology and the internet, and the lack of teacher training in remote teaching methods contributed to this problem⁵.

Educational efficiency and quality also need to be improved. In 2020, the repetition rate in primary education increased across all academic cycles. With regard to educational performance, there was an average decline of 39% in mathematics proficiency across various grades in 2021 when compared to the period from 2017 to 2019⁶.

Educational infrastructure also presents challenges. In 2022, 80.9% of academic centres were in precarious conditions, requiring urgent interventions. Additionally, many of these centres face limited access to drinking water and sanitation services⁷.

In this context, in 2019, UNICEF conducted a mid-term review of its 2017-2021 cooperation cycle, leading to the reorientation of the inclusive education component. The shift focused on promoting safety in school environments and materialized through Canadian and Korean cooperation in two projects that introduced an approach centred on safe and relevant learning environments. The first project, "Inclusive and Safe Education for Girls in Honduras," funded by the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and the second project, "Protective Learning and Parenting Environments: Taking Girls to New Heights," sponsored by the Government of Canada and implemented in the Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). Aligned with the UNICEF Country Program, both projects are based on human rights, gender, and resilience approaches.

The projects focused on children and adolescents, with particular emphasis on girls and female adolescents⁸, teachers, officials, and educational committees as duty bearers. They encompassed the implementation of flexible learning modalities already outlined in the regulations of the National Education System (SNE), the prevention and mitigation of violence against children in schools and surrounding communities, and risk management for climate change in educational centres. According to the PLANE and KOICA reports, the

¹ (EPHPM-INE, 2018-2022).

² (World Bank, 2020)

³ (UNICEF Honduras, 2016)

⁴ Referenced in the Terms of Reference (TOR)

⁵ (UNICEF Honduras, 2020) (UNICEF, 2022)

⁶ (FEREMA, 2022)

⁷ (School Construction. Ministry of Education, 2023).

⁸ KOICA focuses on ages 6 to 17, while PLANE targets ages 10 to 19.

projects reached 55,684 children and adolescents through different activities. Enrollment data from the schools intervened in 2022, as per the Educational Centres Administration System (SACE), indicated that 126,993 children and adolescents benefited from the projects. On the other hand, the projects involved 5,254 teachers and caregivers and 25 Municipal Council for Educational Development (COMDE in Spanish).

Both projects started in 2019 with a similar execution term, spanning until the end of 2022 for KOICA and until March 2023 for PLANE, although the latter was extended at no additional cost until September of the same year. These initiatives were implemented in a complementary fashion, targeting 39 municipalities with high levels of vulnerability⁹ in the departments of Lempira, Gracias a Dios (covered by KOICA), Atlántida, Cortés, Yoro (covered by PLANE), Copán, Francisco Morazán, Intibucá, and Santa Bárbara (covered by both projects). The KOICA project had a budget of US\$4,703,847.00, and the PLANE project had a budget of US\$5,883,333.30.

Given the synergies in their objectives and implementation, the evaluation team structured an integrated Theory of Change (ToC) to guide the evaluation process. According to the ToC: i) **if** children and adolescents, especially those most vulnerable, are safe and protected in gender-sensitive environments, free from all forms of violence, neglect, and abuse or the threat thereof; (ii) **if** they acquire valuable knowledge and skills for life and decent work through flexible, relevant, and high-quality learning opportunities; and (iii) **if** the education system is strengthened to improve resilience within a green learning environment, and instances of violence against children, along with risks from poor sanitation and hygiene and the adverse effects of climate change are diminished, **then** children will enrol in school on time, remain in school, complete primary and secondary education, and achieve better learning outcomes aligned with their developmental potential.

- **Purpose, objective, and scope of the evaluation**

In 2023, the UNICEF Honduras Country Office (CO) enlisted the services of Econometría S.A. to assess the contribution of the projects "Inclusive and Safe Education for Girls in Honduras" (funded by KOICA) and "Protective Learning and Parenting Environments: Taking Girls to New Heights" (funded by the Government of Canada - PLANE) in favour of establishing safe and meaningful learning environments.

The evaluation, which covers the 2019-2022 period, aligns with the implementation years of the projects. This is the first evaluation of the UNICEF Honduras Evaluation Plan for the Country Program (CP) 2022-2026. As a primarily formative evaluation, its focus lies in fostering learning, identifying achievements, outlining sustainability mechanisms, and documenting good practices to provide the CO with evidence to facilitate the mobilization of new resources and ensure ongoing commitment to work in favour of safe learning spaces for children and adolescents.

The primary audience for this report is the Honduras CO, serving as an input for donor accountability. It aids in defining mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of achievements, managing resources effectively, and contributing to the design of strategies for the 2022-2026 CP. The report also aims to be a valuable tool for Korean and Canadian cooperation, supporting accountability regarding the use of their resources in the country. A third audience targeted by the document is the government of Honduras, recognized as a duty bearer. The report provides the government with pertinent information for decision-making and resource management in the education sector, offering insights to continue and expand strategies aimed at ensuring children's and adolescents' access, permanence, learning, and protection in schools, with a focus on girls and female adolescents.

- **Design and methodology**

The evaluation methodology was based on a mixed-methods approach, which focused on demonstrating results in terms of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. This involved collecting qualitative primary information in four municipalities in Honduras (two associated with KOICA, one with PLANE, and one where both KOICA and PLANE operated simultaneously). The data was gathered from

⁹ For the KOICA project, municipalities were chosen based on meeting a minimum of three vulnerability criteria, and they were selected from areas where UNICEF had prior work experience. These criteria included low levels of human development, multidimensional (child) poverty, violence (homicide rate), ethnicity (% indigenous and Afro-Honduran population), and environmental vulnerability (% of the area under threat) (UNICEF and KOICA, 2019). The PLANE project prioritized geographically vulnerable areas with municipalities affected by violence and migration, encompassing both rural and urban areas (GAC and UNICEF, 2019).

qualified informants involved in the design and implementation of the projects, as well as from adolescent beneficiaries, parents, and caregivers.

In addition, secondary quantitative information, encompassing project indicators and national educational indicators from SACE, was analyzed. This analysis involved making mean comparisons between intervention and non-intervention schools to estimate the differences in their achievements in terms of enrollment, dropout, and repetition rates. It is important to note that this approach is not an impact analysis, which would have allowed us to determine the direct attribution of the projects to changes in the target population.

The evaluation strategy for this research involved four significant components: (1) The starting point was a conceptual evaluation based on the reconstruction of the integrated ToC; (2) An in-depth understanding of the evaluation framework through the evaluation matrix; (3) The design and implementation of the mixed-methods methodology; (4) The evaluation per se, considering the processes and results vis-à-vis the predetermined criteria for analysis.

The main limitation faced in the evaluation was the uneven distribution regarding the quality, quantity, and depth of the quantitative documentary information for both projects. This imbalance, especially evident in limitations related to municipal disaggregation and variables such as ethnicity, migration, or vulnerability, required the supplementation of information through interviews to address data gaps. Additionally, there were constraints related to financial information and details on resource execution. These generalized limitations restricted the analysis in terms of execution by period and result, forcing the evaluation to rely on the most recent information available from the annual reports.

Throughout the execution of the evaluation, careful attention was given to the principles of equity and gender equality, as well as human rights, in the design, collection, and analysis phases. The ethical guidelines outlined by the United Nations in the "Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation"¹⁰ were followed. To ensure compliance with these standards, an Ad Hoc Ethics Committee, governed by the 2017 Econometria's Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) protocol, conducted a thorough review.

The UNICEF CO in Honduras played a key role in providing follow-up and technical support for the evaluation. This support was complemented by a Consultative Group (CG), comprising representatives from government institutions and civil society stakeholders engaged in the projects.

- **Evaluation findings and conclusions**

Relevance.

Based on identified needs related to access, quality, and continuity of education for children and adolescents, the KOICA and PLANE projects designed and implemented a range of actions to mitigate risks for children and adolescents while strengthening educational centers as safe and protective spaces. Operating in contexts characterized by poverty and precarious conditions, the projects, in their design, included the provision of school materials and supplies to ensure that vulnerable children were not limited in their access to education. The projects focused on training processes for the entire educational community, specifically in stress management and socioemotional aspects, which became highly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate emergencies. The projects designed actions to empower girls and adolescents by strengthening their image and roles within the community, families, and school settings.

While the project design adequately addressed gender equality needs, opportunities for improvement were identified in the ethnic approach. Clear evidence was lacking to demonstrate that the design responded to the needs of the indigenous and Afro-Honduran population with comprehensive and cross-cutting guidelines for all implementing partners.

The projects demonstrated an outstanding capacity to adapt to emergency situations arising from both COVID-19 and tropical storms, particularly in recognizing the need for connectivity in the virtual education landscape, ensuring rights holders' access to education during pandemic and climatic emergencies. Besides ensuring connectivity by providing electronic devices and distributing essential materials such as learning guides for Spanish leveling, booklets for Educational Bridges, support booklets, and backpacks with

¹⁰ UNEG, 2020. Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation.

notebooks, pencils, and colours; teachers also benefited from training sessions as part of the projects. These sessions aimed to equip teachers with emotional and methodological tools, enabling them to address emotional emergencies and manage stress effectively during times of pandemics or crises.

The alternative modalities designed, adapted, or replicated in the projects played a crucial role in addressing learning barriers within vulnerable groups. This is derived from the fact that each implementing partner conducted a diagnosis in the municipalities and educational centres selected for intervention. This involved Independent Learning Measurement (ILM) tests administered to students from first to sixth grade. This made it easier to adjust the intervention to fit the specific circumstances of each context, and this was enhanced by the active participation of the educational community and families.

The alternative and flexible modalities of the projects adopted a cross-cutting approach to address gender issues. Their aim was to challenge stereotypes, ensure the retention of girls in school for the completion of their education, and encourage the participation of girls and adolescents in decision-making spaces, thereby promoting equal involvement.

Regarding the relevance criterion, the findings lead to the following conclusions: (i) the project design was appropriate and incorporated diagnostic tools to ensure the relevance of the methodologies and actions implemented for each context; (ii) despite not being emergency projects, the KOICA and PLANE projects demonstrated the ability to adapt to the evolving context, effectively mitigating risks for children and adolescents caused by confinement and school closures; (iii) the alternative and flexible modalities were tailored to the specific context of each educational centre, contributing to the elimination of learning and gender barriers.

Coherence. UNICEF's contribution through the projects demonstrates external coherence with the reality of Honduras, aligning with international and national standards, and coordinating effectively with other state and civil society initiatives. The internal coherence of the projects is evident in two key aspects: i) both projects share common objectives, even though the funding sources differ, and ii) a clear linkage exists between resilience and development approaches, with a greater emphasis on climate change resilience than on addressing violence.

The two projects exhibited complementarity in various aspects, including the targeting of municipalities and educational centres, the use of materials and protocols endorsed by the Ministry of Education, adherence to standard methodologies, and a common target population. Collaboration with implementing partners with experience in education projects helped complement these two projects with other initiatives. Concerted efforts were made with partners to ensure alignment with other ongoing initiatives in the field. UNICEF's coordination efforts with diverse actors, including the government and civil society, were evident in the approach of the two projects, promoting overall coherence.

The projects incorporated a comprehensive resilience approach to climate change issues and, more broadly, gender-based violence issues. While the projects maintained their developmental perspective, they effectively implemented resilience in practical terms through participation spaces, training, and institutional support provided to SEDUC for its integration into curricular tools. Regarding gender-based violence, the focus was on addressing the emotional aspects of crisis situations. However, there was no evidence of a more in-depth intervention associated with the development of socio-emotional and relational skills, with an impact on the daily lives of children and adolescents.

In terms of the coherence criterion, the results lead to the following conclusions: (i) UNICEF's contribution through the KOICA and PLANE projects aligns consistently with reality and international and national standards; (ii) the objectives and outcomes of both projects inherently complement each other, addressing gaps and contributing to the mandates or approaches outlined in international standards and national regulations; (iii) the projects effectively leverage the experience of partners and ongoing initiatives in the country and territories; (iv) the projects' approaches and actions aim to enhance capacities for addressing crisis situations, not just mitigating them, highlighting the clear connection between development and humanitarian action.

Effectiveness. The evaluation examines this criterion through two approaches: firstly, by analyzing compliance with the proposed indicators for each project using secondary information and primary qualitative

evidence, and secondly, by evaluating results derived from the analysis of SACE information related to enrollment, dropout, and repetition indicators for schools and municipalities where UNICEF intervention occurred through the KOICA and PLANE projects comparing 2018 and 2022. These two approaches yield varying results regarding the effectiveness of the projects. However, it is crucial to clarify that results based on SACE information cannot be directly attributed to UNICEF, as this does not constitute an impact evaluation.

From the first approach, which involves analyzing compliance with indicators and qualitative information, there is substantial evidence of the achievement of project results in the educational institutions where the work was conducted. Over 80% of the activities aimed at expanding access for children and adolescents to safe, protective, and relevant learning spaces were successfully completed. These activities encompassed infrastructure adaptation, training various stakeholders, and capacity building at both national and local levels. This was ratified by field-based evidence, confirming the strengthened capacities of children, parents, educational institutions, and the government to provide safe spaces, address the needs of children to prevent GBV, respond to basic sanitation and hygiene requirements in educational institutions, and facilitate access to flexible learning opportunities.

From the second approach involving mean difference analysis with SACE data for the aggregate of the 39 municipalities where the projects were implemented, there was a drop in enrollment between 2018 and 2022, influenced by the emergency context discussed in the report. However, the schools intervened by the projects showed a considerably lower enrollment drop by 13.1 percentage points (p.p.) compared to the non-intervened schools in the same municipalities. Regarding the repetition rate, it was 0.4 p.p. higher than in the group of non-intervention schools in those municipalities. Yet, when examining the breakdown by school size, the repetition rate tended to increase less in the intervention schools compared to the non-intervention schools when the enrollment per school was more than 20 students—2 p.p. However, in the analysis differentiated by projects, the schools intervened by KOICA displayed an increase in average enrollment, unlike the other schools, which showed a reduction. However, these results should be considered with caution, given that the municipalities and educational centres selected by the projects were the most vulnerable. Therefore, there is no valid counterfactual group to make comparisons to isolate and determine the effect of the UNICEF intervention based on the KOICA and PLANE projects. In general, the country has witnessed an increase in dropout rates due to high levels of insecurity. According to data from the Social Forum on External Debt and Development of Honduras (FOSDEH in Spanish), 7 out of 10 families are below the poverty line, leading to child labour and large migratory caravans. The increase in grade repetition can be attributed to efforts to prevent student dropout in a context with numerous adversities, where the priority was to retain children and adolescents in the educational system.

Efficiency. While opinions on the adequacy of financial resources were divided among those consulted, it became clear that the available resources facilitated progress toward the set goals. UNICEF and its implementing partners also made efforts to optimize these resources. Regarding human resources, they were tailored to the intended results and gender requirements of the projects, with specific training provided when necessary profiles were not readily available.

Within the efficiency criterion, the project management and monitoring systems were evaluated, revealing that they are partially adequate to assess UNICEF's contribution. While the system was straightforward, provided centralized evidence, and had clear indicators disaggregated by stakeholders, it lacked indicators related to educational performance and beneficiaries' perceptions of well-being or safe environments. Information gaps occurred during implementation, and the absence of personnel with specific detailed monitoring roles in the projects' technical teams impeded effective follow-up and timely decision-making.

Regarding the efficiency criterion, the findings lead to the following conclusions: i) Human and financial resources facilitated progress toward the goals for children and adolescents in general, including specific objectives related to gender and vulnerable groups; and ii) The management and monitoring system exhibited weaknesses, with indicators having information gaps or lack of continuity during project implementation, hindering effective monitoring for decision-making and timely evaluation.

Sustainability. Sustainability could be linked to enhancing the education system's ability to redefine its normative and management framework based on evidence. In this sense, the results indicate that project activities contribute to reinforcing the National Education System's (SNE in Spanish) existing normative framework through the implementation of modalities already outlined in the Ministry of Education's (SEDUC

in Spanish) framework for action, along with the creation of materials and other flexible methodologies aimed at enhancing access and the quality of education.

At the municipal level, the evaluation recognizes that planning tools were developed to operationalize actions, methodologies, and models within the educational community. This includes tools like diagnoses, school plans, and safety plans. In terms of the sustainability of actions related to safe spaces, the projects provided a collection of tools, including manuals, methodologies, and documents. These resources empower educational institutions and teachers to implement the knowledge gained in their future projects.

In an effort to ensure institutional anchorage, the projects focused on enhancing the capacities of SEDUC, schools, and participating communities through training and support in designing and implementing pedagogical tools.

Key factors highlighted in the evaluation include the participatory approach employed by the projects, UNICEF's established reputation and track record in Honduras, the implementing partners' experience in education projects in the territories, the project's adaptability to climate and public health contingencies, investment in WASH actions, sustainability of human resources, the efforts to empower girls and adolescent women, and the implementation of learning methods highly valued by teachers.

In terms of sustainability, the findings indicate that i) capacities within the SNE were enhanced across various levels; ii) the participatory and collaborative process with SEDUC played a crucial role in ensuring alignment and commitment from departmental and municipal authorities; iii) participation and learning opportunities at various project stages contributed to the educational community's ownership of the actions.

- **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on the results found and have been validated and prioritized in a participatory workshop with the CG:¹¹

1. Enhance the management, monitoring, and evaluation systems to facilitate adaptive project management from the outset and provide insights into their processes and outcomes.
2. Strengthen coordination among implementing partners, strategies, and experiences, moving beyond complementarity toward greater integration.
3. Sustain and expand advocacy actions with the national government, particularly with SEDUC, focusing on gender and violence prevention.
4. Sustain and enhance the participation of teachers, school administrators, children, families, and communities at various project levels.
5. Sustain and reinforce didactic and material resources to strengthen the capabilities of the human talent involved in project implementation.
6. Promote strategies for emotional development that go beyond a first aid approach to mental health crises, enabling teachers and children to better understand life skills related to emotions, self-regulation, empathy, solidarity, communication, and conflict resolution.
7. Gradually expand the inclusion of ethnic communities through pilot projects, ensuring that flexible strategies are relevant to the community from an intercultural perspective.

¹¹ The order of the recommendations is based on the prioritization determined by participants at the recommendations workshop.