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THREE DECADES OF UZBEKISTAN–UNICEF COOPERATION: HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE, MAJOR STAGES, RESULTS AND PROSPECTS (1994–2026)

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the evolution of cooperation between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) from the establishment of UNICEF's country presence in 1994 to October 2026. Its purpose is to identify the partnership's principal historical stages, distinguish institutional outputs from changes in child well-being, and assess the opportunities and limitations of the 2026–2030 cooperation framework. A qualitative historical-documentary design is applied to United Nations agreements, UNICEF country programme documents, official progress reports, and publicly available national and international child-related indicators. Comparative reading and descriptive analysis reveal four overlapping phases: establishment of a rights-based legal and operational framework (1994–2007), consolidation of sectoral cooperation (2008–2016), integration with extensive national reforms (2017–2024), and transition to a more explicitly systems-oriented programme (2025–2026). Uzbekistan's estimated under-five mortality rate fell from 69.1 per 1,000 live births in 1994 to 13.4 in 2024; preschool coverage and social protection also expanded, although disparities in service quality and child protection remain. The analysis concludes that UNICEF's contribution is best understood in terms of technical cooperation, convening, evidence production, and institutional capacity rather than sole responsibility for national outcomes. Continued progress will require better disaggregated monitoring, adequate financing, stronger local service delivery, and rigorous evaluation of implementation.

Keywords: Uzbekistan; UNICEF; history of international cooperation; children's rights; social protection; education reform; child health; IMRAD.

1. INTRODUCTION

Following independence in 1991, Uzbekistan sought to establish international partnerships capable of supporting the development of its public institutions and the realization of social rights. Cooperation with UNICEF gradually became part of this wider engagement. UNICEF's country office was established in Uzbekistan in 1994, and a Basic Cooperation Agreement between the Government and UNICEF was concluded on 19 December 1994 [1, 2, 5]. The year 2024 therefore marked thirty years of UNICEF's presence; the period ending in October 2026 covers approximately thirty-two years rather than exactly thirty [2].

The partnership has involved interconnected objectives: protecting children's rights, reducing avoidable child mortality, supporting immunization, improving educational opportunity, strengthening the protection of vulnerable children, and widening access to social assistance. Yet an account based only on milestones may obscure important distinctions. The adoption of a law, the introduction of a new administrative institution, and an improvement in a child-level indicator represent different forms of evidence. Their relationship must be examined rather than presumed.

Existing literature has reconstructed the sequence of UNICEF–Uzbekistan cooperation, including a 2025 study by Davronova that periodized developments between 1994 and 2025 [3]. The present

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paper adopts a different analytical focus. Rather than repeating an event-based chronology, it compares the changing mechanisms of cooperation—legal commitments, programme design, service-system support, and the use of data—with observable outcomes and persistent gaps. It also incorporates official programme priorities and selected implementation developments reported in 2026.

The study addresses three research questions: (1) How did the institutional character of Uzbekistan–UNICEF cooperation change between 1994 and 2026? (2) Which verifiable indicators and reforms demonstrate progress, and which challenges remain? (3) What does the 2026–2030 country programme imply for future cooperation? The working proposition is that the partnership developed from building a basic normative and operational framework towards a broader model of nationally owned, evidence-informed systems strengthening. This proposition is assessed through documentary evidence rather than accepted as a predetermined conclusion.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper uses a qualitative historical-documentary approach supplemented by descriptive comparison of published indicators. The primary corpus comprises the international record of Uzbekistan's accession to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1994 Basic Cooperation Agreement as recorded in a United Nations cooperation framework, UNICEF's 2024 thirty-year review, and the UNICEF country programme documents for 2021–2025 and 2026–2030 [1, 2, 4–6]. Additional materials include UNICEF's country data, publicly reported immunization and social-protection results, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) findings, and dated announcements concerning 2026 education and local-governance initiatives [7–12].

The analytical procedure involved four steps. First, legal and programmatic documents were arranged chronologically. Second, the partnership was divided into phases using turning points in legal frameworks, policy priorities, and institutional organization. Third, a limited set of comparable outcome and system indicators was extracted, with the original measurement years retained. Fourth, programme objectives for 2026–2030 were compared with the challenges identified in recent assessments. This procedure permits historical interpretation and transparent, descriptive comparisons; it does not provide a counterfactual estimate of UNICEF's independent causal impact.

Source criticism was applied throughout. Institutional reports often combine government achievements with UNICEF-supported activities, and indicators may use different definitions, reference years, and denominators. Accordingly, national trends are described as outcomes observed during the period of cooperation, while UNICEF-specific contributions are attributed only when supported by the source. Prospective targets, indicative budgets, and expected beneficiaries are not presented as accomplished results. The documentary cut-off date is 27 October 2026. No interviews, original surveys, or unpublished archival records were used.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Historical phases of cooperation

Phase I: establishment of a rights-based and operational framework (1994–2007). Uzbekistan acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on 29 June 1994, and UNICEF established its country presence during the same year [1, 2]. The Basic Cooperation Agreement of 19 December 1994 formalized the operational relationship. During the first post-independence decade, the partnership's historical significance was primarily institutional: it linked domestic priorities for children's well-being with international rights-based principles, technical knowledge, and the emergence of regular programme cooperation. Available later programme documents provide stronger evidence for the

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continuity of these arrangements than for a precise quantitative attribution of results during these early years.

Phase II: consolidation of sectoral and legal cooperation (2008–2016). The 2008 Law on Guarantees of the Rights of the Child and Uzbekistan's engagement with international standards on child labour and protection expanded the normative context for cooperation [2]. Health, nutrition, education, and child-related measurement increasingly served as practical channels for translating formal commitments into programmes. This phase can be interpreted as a bridge between basic legal recognition and more comprehensive reform, although uneven archival coverage limits the precision with which yearly programme changes can be reconstructed.

Phase III: integration with national reforms (2017–2024). A major change was the scale and scope of reforms in education, social protection, and public administration. UNICEF's 2021–2025 country programme explicitly situated its support within the reform agenda and recognized major equity gaps, including low preschool participation in some regions and barriers faced by children with disabilities [4]. The period also saw an expansion of preschool services, development of social-benefit administration, and reforms in the care of children separated from families. The National Agency for Social Protection was established in 2023, creating a new institutional partner and coordination framework for child-focused services [2, 13]. The UNICEF review published in December 2024 summarized achievements at the partnership's thirtieth-anniversary milestone [2].

Phase IV: programme transition and initial implementation (2025–October 2026). The new country programme for 2026–2030 reorganized cooperation around four substantive components: enabling environment and social inclusion; child health and development; learning, skills and participation; and child protection [6]. In August 2026, the Ministry of Preschool and School Education launched a new National Curriculum Framework developed with UNICEF support and other partners, intended to improve learning for approximately seven million learners [11]. In June 2026, a jointly implemented local-governance programme reported activities in twelve pilot districts and cities across four regions, including Kashkadarya [12]. These announcements demonstrate implementation activity, but it is too early to infer their long-term educational or governance effects.

3.2. Measurable outcomes and institutional reforms

Child survival offers one of the longest comparable statistical series. UNICEF's country database reports an estimated under-five mortality rate of 69.1 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1994 and 13.4 in 2024, a descriptive decline of about 80.6 per cent [7]. The improvement is substantial, but the figures cannot isolate UNICEF's contribution from changes in health policy, national financing, household conditions, medical practice, and other domestic or international factors. UNICEF describes its contribution through support for the national immunization programme, vaccine procurement and cold-chain improvements; its country information reports that the UNICEF-supported programme reached nearly four million children under five in 2024 [8].

Education indicators likewise show expansion in access. UNICEF's thirty-year review records preschool participation among children aged three to six rising from 25.4 per cent in 2017 to 71.1 per cent in 2023 [2]. Its subsequent programme document reports preschool coverage exceeding 73 per cent in 2024 [6]. The indicators should not be combined into a single causal estimate without checking definitions and official time-series consistency. The development is nonetheless consistent with a significant broadening of early-childhood education, while the 2021–2025 programme documented difficulties in quality, inclusion, and territorial equality [4].

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In social protection, the 2026–2030 country programme reports that monetary child poverty fell from 22 per cent in 2021 to 14 per cent in 2023, a reduction of eight percentage points [6]. UNICEF's social-protection programme describes technical support for social registries, cash-transfer mechanisms and financing policy, and reports that coverage of children by cash transfers reached about 40 per cent in 2023 [9]. These figures refer to different indicators—poverty and benefit coverage—and should not be treated as interchangeable. Institutional progress is also reflected in the establishment of the National Agency for Social Protection in 2023 [2, 9].

Child protection reveals both reform and unresolved risk. The 2026–2030 programme records the closure of twenty-three large residential care facilities in the preceding two years, with the rate of children in residential care falling from 241 per 100,000 children in 2022 to 182 in 2023 [6]. At the same time, MICS 2021–2022 recorded that 62.2 per cent of children aged 1–14 had experienced physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers during the preceding month [10]. Thus, institutional change and the reduction of selected forms of institutional care have not yet removed the need for prevention, family-support services, and protection from violence.

The evidence is summarized in Table 1. The measures represent different years, populations and units; they are selected as signposts of change, not as a composite index of partnership performance.

Table 1. Selected national indicators during the period of cooperation

Indicator	Earlier observation	Later observation	Descriptive change	Source
Under-five mortality	69.1 per 1,000 live births (1994)	13.4 per 1,000 (2024)	≈80.6% decline	[7]
Preschool coverage, ages 3–6	25.4% (2017)	71.1% (2023)	+45.7 percentage points	[2]
Monetary child poverty	22% (2021)	14% (2023)	−8 percentage points	[6]
Children in residential care	241 per 100,000 (2022)	182 per 100,000 (2023)	≈24.5% decline	[6]

Note: These indicators do not estimate UNICEF's separate causal effect and have different reference years and denominators.

3.3. The 2026–2030 framework: programme design and resource implications

The 2026–2030 programme document proposes a total indicative budget of US$110.9 million, consisting of US$10.9 million in regular resources and US$100 million in other resources, the latter conditional on contributions [6]. It would be incorrect to report this entire amount as already secured or disbursed. The funding profile emphasizes that programme objectives depend on partnership mobilization, domestic commitment and implementation capacity.

A distinctive feature of the framework is its integration of child-rights monitoring, public finance for children, climate resilience, primary health care, learning outcomes, family-based protection, and adolescent participation. The document envisages further child-centred household measurement, including a MICS round planned for 2027–2028, and evaluation of maternal and perinatal health and education reforms [6]. These provisions could strengthen accountability if data become timely,

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publicly accessible and sufficiently disaggregated by region, disability, gender and household circumstances.

The 2026 education and local-governance initiatives illustrate the broadening of cooperation beyond centrally designed service projects. The National Curriculum Framework is described as competency-based and inclusive, with contributions from 147 national and thirty international specialists [11]. The local-governance initiative seeks to link youth participation with planning and budgeting in pilot localities [12]. Their relevance lies in the mechanisms being tested; claims of impact will require subsequent independent assessment.

4. DISCUSSION

Three interpretive findings emerge from the documentary comparison. First, the partnership shows continuity in its child-rights orientation alongside changes in the instruments used to pursue it. The 1994 framework provided formal channels for operation and engagement; subsequent cooperation increasingly emphasized legislation, technical standards, information systems, social-service professionals and coordinated public policy. This development supports the proposition of a transition towards systems strengthening, but it has been cumulative rather than an abrupt replacement of earlier forms of assistance.

Second, the relationship between collaboration and national results is not one-to-one. The decline in under-five mortality and rising preschool attendance are documented national trends, not experimental estimates of UNICEF-induced change. The evidence supports a more defensible statement: UNICEF contributed technical assistance, procurement support, analytical evidence and programme coordination within reforms conducted by the Government of Uzbekistan and supported by multiple partners. Distinguishing contribution from attribution is particularly important for the historical interpretation of international organizations.

Third, aggregate progress conceals uneven experience across groups and territories. The 2021–2025 programme identified especially limited access to preschool education in Kashkadarya, Surkhandarya and some other locations at the start of the period [4]. The 2026–2030 document identifies continuing challenges in inclusive schooling, adolescent well-being, child protection and local service quality [6]. A rights-based historical assessment therefore needs to consider not only national averages, but also whether vulnerable children have actually gained access to effective services.

From an institutional perspective, the creation of the National Agency for Social Protection and the development of local-government initiatives suggest a more coordinated environment for cross-sectoral work. However, legal enactment and organizational creation are intermediate results. Their ultimate value depends on trained personnel, sustainable budgets, functioning referral systems, information sharing, and accountability. In the child-protection field, high reported levels of violent discipline demonstrate that behavioral and service-delivery change may lag behind statutory and administrative developments.

The prospects for 2026–2030 should therefore be evaluated against five operational priorities: (a) more reliable and comparable monitoring of child outcomes; (b) improved primary health care, especially maternal and newborn care; (c) progress from school attendance to learning achievement and meaningful inclusion; (d) preventive and family-based child-protection services; and (e) equitable financing and climate-responsive social protection in environmentally vulnerable regions. For the Aral

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Sea region, health, water and climate exposures justify an explicit territorial lens in monitoring. These priorities are consistent with, but not guaranteed by, the programme design [6].

The study has limitations. The early decades are represented largely by institutional and retrospective sources; this does not substitute for archival research into annual negotiations and implementation. Some time series and administrative indicators are drawn from reports with differing reference periods. The most recent developments—particularly those launched in 2026—are assessed as documented activities or stated intentions rather than proven long-term outcomes. Future research should combine archive-based historical inquiry with programme evaluations, subnational datasets and interviews with national and UNICEF counterparts.

5. CONCLUSION

Uzbekistan–UNICEF cooperation from 1994 to October 2026 reflects more than thirty years of evolving international partnership. Its foundational period established an internationally recognized legal and operational basis; later stages broadened sectoral collaboration and connected it to national reforms; and the transition to the 2026–2030 programme places increased weight on coordinated systems, inclusion, monitoring, sustainable financing and local delivery.

The evidence indicates major improvements in several national indicators, particularly child survival and preschool participation, together with substantial development of social-protection and child-protection institutions. At the same time, violence against children, disparities in inclusion and service quality, and the risks associated with climate change remain significant. The principal conclusion is that the historical contribution of UNICEF should be evaluated through the interaction of national ownership and international technical cooperation, rather than through simplified causal attribution. The next phase will be judged less by the number of strategies adopted than by their verifiable benefits for children, including those currently at greatest risk of exclusion.

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