

# Formative Evaluation of UNICEF's #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative in Malaysia: Evaluation Brief

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) works in over 190 countries and territories to save children's lives, defend their rights and help them to fulfil their potential. In 2013, UNICEF published a groundbreaking State of the World's Children Report that focused specifically on children with disabilities. It highlighted the impact that disability<sup>1</sup> can have on children's life chances even when their lives may already be difficult; that children and young people with disabilities are at greater risk of being poor than their peers without disabilities; and that they experience their poverty more acutely because of the additional barriers they face living with their impairments.

UNICEF Malaysia committed to scaling up its focus on disability with the launch of its #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative 2017-2020. The overall goal of the Initiative is to make positive changes for children with disabilities in Malaysia, so that they are free from discrimination and able to access services to support their growth, development and protection. This goal is underpinned by six key objectives:

- a) Children with disabilities have increased access to high quality services
- b) Children with disabilities do not experience abuse and discrimination
- c) Children and adolescents with disabilities are empowered to advocate for themselves
- d) General public are aware of children with disabilities
- e) Children with disabilities are socially included
- f) Children with disabilities can contribute positively in society.

A summary of key events under the Initiative is available in Figure 1; some events were nationwide, but many were concentrated in Kota Kinabalu and Kuala Lumpur.

UNICEF Malaysia commissioned a formative evaluation of the Initiative in 2018, mid-way through the programme. The primary purpose was to draw lessons from a focused analysis in order to identify how UNICEF Malaysia might transition from being an organization that undertakes disability-focused activities, to one that fully embeds disability in its work.<sup>2</sup> The evaluation sought to identify and document knowledge generated by the Initiative to inform UNICEF Malaysia's current and emerging programmes.

**Figure 1: Summary of key events undertaken under the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative**

2017	2018	2019
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch of #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative</li> <li>• Disability Actors Database compiled</li> <li>• Public Advocacy Campaign for Borneo International Marathon</li> <li>• RAGE videos showcase Paralympians</li> <li>• ManUnited campaign launch in combination with Borneo International Marathon</li> <li>• Disability Equality Training</li> <li>• Petrosains – Inclusion Champion</li> <li>• #ThisAbility Makeathon</li> <li>• Launch of KAP Survey</li> <li>• NGO Impact Academy</li> <li>• Empowering Teachers and Trainers training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• #ThisAbility truck</li> <li>• Disability Equality Training</li> <li>• Public Advocacy Campaign for Borneo International Marathon</li> <li>• Sime Darby Properties – Inclusion Champion</li> <li>• Inclusive Playground inception – design</li> <li>• We are all special inclusive carnival</li> <li>• What’s so special international day of persons with disability campaign</li> <li>• What’s so special about Ima? U-Report pick a path story</li> <li>• National conference on inclusion at National Early Childhood Intervention Council</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What’s so special about special education call to action</li> </ul>

## Evaluation objectives

1. To analyse the strategies used to map out the trajectory of the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative and re-construct the Theory of Change behind making positive changes for children with disabilities in Malaysia;
2. To assess the extent to which the Initiative has been appropriately designed, efficiently and effectively managed, and integrated across the Country Programme, including the incorporation of equity, gender equality and human rights considerations;
3. To examine the evolution of UNICEF’s work on children with disabilities in Malaysia, and in particular the intermediate results achieved by UNICEF’s #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative, enabling and disabling factors, considering aspects of both reduction of discrimination as well as access to services – including advocacy and awareness-raising both at the national and sub-national level; and its likely sustainability;
4. To analyse the utility of creating a flagship on specific focus issues in order to promote cross-sectoral work, including strengths and weaknesses.

At the request of UNICEF’s Evaluation Specialist, the external evaluators paid particular attention to the following ten activities when analysing the effectiveness, relevance, efficiency and sustainability of the aims and objectives in the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative Working Paper:

Disability Equality Training; Inclusive Journalism Workshop; #ThisAbility Public Advocacy Campaign; Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey launch/dissemination; #ThisAbility Makeathon and video; NGO Impact Academy; The Borneo International Marathon #ThisAbility themed; Corporate Inclusion Champions (with Petrosains and Sime Darby Properties); We Are All Special: A Carnival for All; Inclusive Playground.

## Evaluation methodology

This evaluation looked at both the design and management of the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative, as well as assessing its effectiveness, relevance, efficiency and sustainability. A Theory of Change is included in the recommendations, and is aimed at assisting UNICEF Malaysia to better meet its commitments towards championing the rights of children with disabilities.

This evaluation followed a largely qualitative design and mixed-methods approach, which drew upon three key strands of data collection:

- I. Three **focus group discussions** (FGDs) were carried out with 11 pairs of children and young people with disabilities and their parents/carers. We ensured both boys and girls were included. The FGDs also included those with cognitive, mobility and hearing impairments. They were carried out in Klang Valley, Sabah and Sarawak, and helped us to understand some of the experiences and challenges faced by children with disabilities and their families.
- II. Forty-two **key informant interviews** (KIIs) were conducted with staff from UNICEF and key partner organizations, as well as three government representatives. All interviews were guided by a set of prepared questions developed and agreed with UNICEF Malaysia.
- III. **A document review** of internal (UNICEF) documents provided by UNICEF Malaysia helped us familiarize ourselves with all aspects of the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative. A review of external documents (including national and international strategies) supplemented the internal document review, providing context around disability-inclusion in Malaysia and the relevance of the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative. Over 180 documents were analysed.

## What we found

### In terms of effectiveness:

Most of those directly involved in activities implemented under the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative found them to be interesting, exciting and of benefit to the children with disabilities who took part. However, since the activities were all one-off events, there has been little opportunity for effecting lasting attitudinal change, and no clear evidence of effectiveness in reducing discrimination and enabling access to services by children and adolescents with disabilities. The lack of an advocacy strategy, behavioural change activities, follow-on activities, and an absence of monitoring structures (including the collection of disability-disaggregated data) mean that UNICEF Malaysia is currently unable to determine whether its interventions are having an impact on changing attitudes. The disconnect between the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative goals and objectives and the intent for the Initiative to promote mainstreaming of disability programming within the UNICEF Malaysia office has limited the effectiveness of the Initiative in all respects.

### **In terms of relevance:**

UNICEF Malaysia has signalled a strong desire to work on disability-inclusion within its Country Programme Document and country strategy documents. In turn, the Government of Malaysia has also made public its intentions to create more equal and inclusive services. Given that the government has ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), but has struggled with implementation, UNICEF's intention to work on disability is highly relevant. UNICEF Malaysia has missed opportunities to better align its activities under the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative with broader influencing around the rights of persons with disabilities, for example it has not made explicit use of international frameworks such as the CRPD in its campaigning. The lack of an overall advocacy strategy has limited the success of individual events to have a broader impact.

### **In terms of efficiency:**

The activities delivered under the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative were generally observed by stakeholders to have been well resourced and well managed, with a high degree of technical support provided. Internally, concerns were raised that the prioritisation of resources, especially human resources, was insufficient to effect organization-wide change, and that a more strategic approach to disability is required. The lack of systematic monitoring has made it difficult for UNICEF Malaysia to assess whether its resources have been used in the most efficient way.

### **In terms of sustainability:**

Due to the fact that the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative is intended to be primarily an internal management device to increase disability work across the organization, it currently lacks the national ownership required for sustainability. While many events and campaigns have been run with a view to changing attitudes, knowledge and practices (as noted in previous sections), the lack of an advocacy strategy and any systematic monitoring data mean this evaluation cannot determine their impact or sustainability.

### **In terms of the utility of a Flagship Initiative:**

The Flagship Initiative enabled cross-sectional collaboration, raised the visibility of disability-inclusion, and strengthened access to good quality technical guidance for UNICEF staff. To further strengthen flagship initiatives there is need for UNICEF Malaysia to be explicit in providing a clear definition of what constitutes a 'flagship initiative' before developing such mechanisms in the future.

## **Key lessons**

**Deep-rooted attitudes towards disability require strong, coordinated rights-based messaging to effect change.** By not explicitly promoting the rights of children with disabilities, or linking their exclusion and lack of visibility to the barriers that exist within communities and systems, disability can continue to be considered as an 'individual's problem'. This therefore undermines efforts to achieve systemic and sustainable change.

**A Theory of Change and strong monitoring systems are required to help mainstream disability at an organizational level.** Observations during this evaluation underscore the importance of some key components that, in the external evaluators' experience, are essential to disability-inclusion programming:

- a. Explicit organizational commitment** – the organization *as a whole* makes it clear why it is committed (its overall values); and what it seeks to achieve through this commitment (its overall purpose).
- b. Inclusive programmes and services** – the organization will ensure that all of its direct services and programmes are delivered in inclusive, equitable and non-discriminatory ways and do not create barriers or reinforce negative stereotypes. This means ensuring all programmes are accessible to people with disabilities, regardless of whether or not they are an intended target.
- c. Disaggregated data** – all programme data is disaggregated by disability using an international standard definition of disability (for example the Washington Group Question sets - [www.washingtongroup-disability.com](http://www.washingtongroup-disability.com)).

**A short-term mindset can present safeguarding concerns and possible challenges for future engagement.** Several of the assistive tools created during key Initiative events were broken by the time of this evaluation, leaving children who participated in the event without their new gadgets. Participants reported disappointment and frustration with this and gave other similar examples. This raises serious questions around one-off events that are potentially life-enhancing but leave participants without the products they had helped to create, or continued opportunities to develop their new skills. Such activities may inadvertently cross the ‘do no harm’ threshold because they are relatively high profile and do not adequately consider or prepare for the experiences of the child participants whose expectations were raised and then not fulfilled.

## Key Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

**To:** Country Representative, Deputy Representative, Planning Monitoring and Evaluation Chief

**Priority:** High

**Timeline:** 6-months

**UNICEF Malaysia needs to make a strategic commitment to disability-inclusion by fully embedding disability into key planning documents with the expectation that children with disabilities will be included and monitored across all areas of programming. We encourage UNICEF Malaysia to start doing this in the short-term, beginning with the forthcoming strategic planning.**

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### Recommendation 2

**To:** Country Representative, Deputy Representative, Communications Chief, Private Funding and Partnerships Chief, C4D Specialist

**Priority:** Medium

**Timeline:** 12-months

**UNICEF Malaysia, starting immediately, needs to be much more explicitly rights-focused in its messaging around disability and ensuring its campaigns fully align with key international frameworks, including the CRPD.**

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### Recommendation 3

**To:** Country Representative, Deputy Representative, Communications Chief, Programme Staff  
**Priority:** Medium  
**Timeline:** 12-months

**UNICEF Malaysia, starting immediately, needs to provide more opportunities to meaningfully engage children and young people (with and without disabilities) during the design of campaigns and messaging.**

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### Recommendation 4

**To:** Country Representative, Deputy Representative, Communications Chief, Programme Chiefs and Programme Staff  
**Priority:** High  
**Timeline:** 6-months

**UNICEF Malaysia urgently needs to develop robust and rigorous safeguarding review processes for all activities involving children and young people with disabilities.**

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### Recommendation 5

**To:** Country Representative, Deputy Representative, Gender Focal Point, Communications Chief, Programme Chiefs and Programme Staff  
**Priority:** Medium  
**Timeline:** 12-months

**UNICEF Malaysia needs, starting as soon as possible, to routinely assess new and existing programmes and activities to ensure gender and social inclusion norms and unequal power relations are considered in full.**

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, children and young people with disabilities are defined as those under 18 years of age and: ‘...who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’.
- <sup>2</sup> During the finalisation of this report UNICEF staff emphasised that the #ThisAbility Flagship Initiative was “established as a platform to encourage sections to work collaboratively on disability-related initiatives. It was designed to test out innovative ways of approaching disability in UNICEF’s work. It also intended to build the confidence of staff and partners to be disability-inclusive in their approach to designing and implementing initiatives and programmes”.