



Summary of the Evaluation of the UNICEF Response to the Level 3 Humanitarian Crisis in Syria

October 2022

SUMMARY FINDING



The UNICEF response to the crisis in Syria, while variable across sectors and locations, has been strong overall, in spite of an extraordinarily challenging context. UNICEF managed to identify the right roles for itself, although it has sometimes struggled to fulfil those roles, often for reasons beyond its control. In common with other agencies, it has also struggled to mount a response proportionate to the scale of needs. Despite this, the hard work and commitment of UNICEF staff and partners have helped protect millions of children across all parts of Syria from the worst effects of the crisis. Those consulted for the evaluation noted the commitment, professionalism and expertise of UNICEF staff, the organization's generally strong relations with other actors, including with governing authorities, local partners, sister United Nations agencies and donors, and its strong reputation in the region.

The evaluation also found that UNICEF needs to develop a more coherent approach to its work across the whole of Syria. In particular, it needs a better-defined approach to the wider humanitarian agenda in order to address the acute and pervasive threats to children's well-being and development. While support to direct service delivery remains crucial, UNICEF should continue to demonstrate the case for more systematic and sustainable approaches to meeting needs in a context of protracted recovery, while pursuing opportunities to help strengthen child-related policy and systems. Resourcing this in the face of diminishing donor funding will require prioritization, a phased approach and greater programmatic focus, and it will require new forms of partnership and collaboration.

This summary sets out the evaluation purpose, scope and methodology, as well as its findings, conclusions and recommendations. The full report is available at <https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/reports#/detail/18406>.

Evaluation purpose and scope

Purpose

Commissioned by the UNICEF Evaluation Office, this evaluation concerns the UNICEF response to the Level 3 (L3) humanitarian crisis in Syria over the period 2018–2021. It has both a learning and accountability purpose, and while it is largely summative in nature, it makes recommendations for strengthening the organization's approach in light of the current situation and likely future developments in the country.

The evaluation is *strategic* rather than technical or operational in its focus: it asks whether UNICEF has found the right roles for itself in Syria over the past four years given the evolving context, and how well it performed in those roles. This includes consideration of UNICEF interventions across the whole of Syria, managed from three main 'hubs' (Damascus, Gaziantep, Amman), including how well these interventions have been harmonized. It takes an 'outside-in' approach, assessing the value of UNICEF interventions with respect to the priorities for children and their families, the organization's mandate and core functions, the roles played by other actors and the needs of the wider response. These in turn are considered against the backdrop of an evolving political, institutional, economic and demographic context across the country.

As set out in the terms of reference (ToR), the evaluation is intended to fulfil two functions:

- (i) An **accountability** function, reflecting the need to account (internally and externally) for one of the largest UNICEF country programmes, designated a corporate L3 priority throughout the evaluation period;
- (ii) A **learning** function, reflecting the need to capture lessons from a programme of this duration and significance, to inform the in-country programme and UNICEF global programming and practice.

The specific objectives of the evaluation as described in the ToR are to:

- (i) Provide a comprehensive assessment of the overall UNICEF response to the crisis (including cross-border programming) in relation to the organization's mandate and standards, its stated objectives and standard evaluation criteria;
- (ii) Based on collation and analysis of relevant data and information, generate evidence, conclusions and key lessons and make recommendations to improve the response in Syria and similar responses elsewhere and in the future.

Scope

The scope of the evaluation is limited to UNICEF work in Syria itself; it does not cover the response to the wider regional crisis involving Syrian refugees in surrounding countries or programming for Palestinian refugees in Syria. As per the ToR, the evaluation assesses the appropriateness of the UNICEF strategy and programme designs in the sectors supported by UNICEF, and the delivery modalities in the different parts of the country, including for hard-to-reach populations. It also includes “an assessment of coverage, results, effectiveness, quality and efficiency, as well as a review of the quality and use of evidence, assessing how well the response has used previous evidence ... to inform or adapt current programming, and what systems are in place to monitor the situation and UNICEF performance”. The evaluation also includes a review of key issues arising in the management and operational aspects of the programme.

The evaluation reviews what is understood to be the whole agenda of humanitarian concern for UNICEF in seeking to answer the evaluation questions. To this end, it covers those elements that relate to addressing the more acute effects of the crisis on children (emergency response, direct service delivery); urgent recovery and rehabilitation agendas, including support to essential services and prevention of system

collapse; and addressing critical short- to medium-term threats to child development. Taken together, these are understood as constituting the humanitarian agenda in the broader sense in which it is understood in the Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) for Syria.

The corollary of this broad approach is that in this evaluation there is inevitably limited depth of coverage of each sector, and of the specific issues relating to management and operational support. Since this is not a technical evaluation or a detailed review of programme components, the analysis is not structured according to sectors of intervention. However, examples from sectoral interventions across different parts of the country – and specifically the three main crisis areas – are used to inform the analysis of broader issues of relevance, coverage, effectiveness and so on.

Evaluation questions, methodology and process

The evaluation focuses on the relevance and coverage of the UNICEF response, its quality and effectiveness, its coherence across sectors and geographic areas, and its connectedness and balance between short- and longer-term agendas. It is based on an extensive documentary and data review, together with remote informant interviews during an inception phase (July–August

2021); in-person interviews in Gaziantep and Amman in September and October 2021; field visits and in-person interviews in Syria (Damascus, Aleppo, Deir-ez-Zor) in November 2021; subsequent follow-up informant interviews; and online surveys of staff and partners. (For operational reasons, the evaluation team was not able to travel in the areas of northwestern and northeastern Syria outside government control.) The evaluation also takes account of other relevant reviews, evaluations and studies, including the UNICEF Syria Corporate Review (February 2019), an internal review of UNICEF Whole of Syria (WoS) coordination in 2021, and the internal audit of the Syria

country office (December 2019). It is being undertaken concurrently with a formative 'strategic shift' evaluation commissioned separately by the Syria country office (SCO).

The evaluation team devised a framework of guiding questions for the evaluation, building on those in the ToR. These provided the basis for informant interviews and documentary analysis. Together with sub-questions, criteria and potential evidence sources, they are set out in full in the evaluation matrix in Annex 2. Below, we list the main headings and related evaluation criteria.

Overall evaluation questions

How well has UNICEF served the best interests of children (short- and medium-term) across the whole of Syria since 2018? Has it found the right roles for itself, overall and by sector? What has been the main added value of UNICEF interventions? What can be learned from this for the future of UNICEF work in the country, region and globally?

- A. Evolution of Syria context, priority issues for children, operating context**
(Questions of appropriateness and relevance of UNICEF response)
 - B. UNICEF strategy, needs assessment, planning and programme design**
(Relevance, appropriateness, coverage, equity, coherence)
 - C. Programme performance and impact**
(Quality, results, effectiveness)
 - D. Partnerships, coordination and collaboration**
(Coverage, external coherence, connectedness, efficiency)
 - E. Management, operations and support functions**
(Efficiency and control)
 - F. Cross-cutting issues**
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Background and context

The evolving humanitarian situation and priorities for children

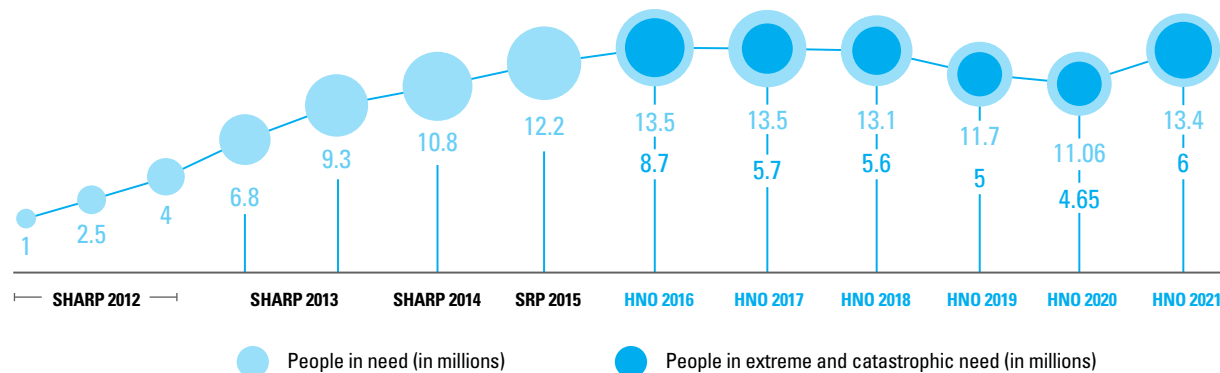
The humanitarian situation in Syria has evolved considerably over the course of the crisis, yet it still demands high-priority engagement from UNICEF and others. On some metrics, notably food security, the situation continues to deteriorate, as reflected in the most recent United Nations-led Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) for 2022. Needs now relate less to the direct effects of conflict than to its indirect effects: continuing mass displacement, steep economic decline, damaged or lost infrastructure, inoperative systems, loss of

professional capacities, and related loss of access to basic services. Over half of the pre-conflict population remains displaced, of which around 6.9 million are internally displaced (a further 5.6 million are refugees). Greater stability has allowed increased humanitarian access in some areas, although access remained limited throughout the evaluation period, particularly in areas of the country outside government control. High levels of insecurity continue to characterize some areas, particularly in northwestern Syria (NWS).

The United Nations assessment of the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance over time is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Number of people inside Syria in need of humanitarian assistance

People in Need by Year
2012 – 2021



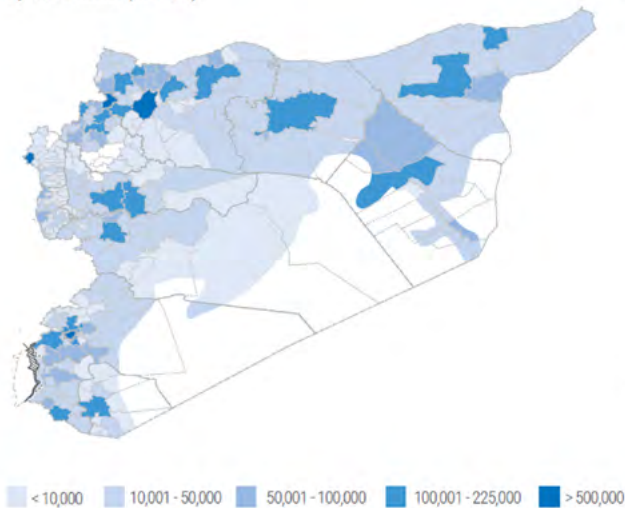
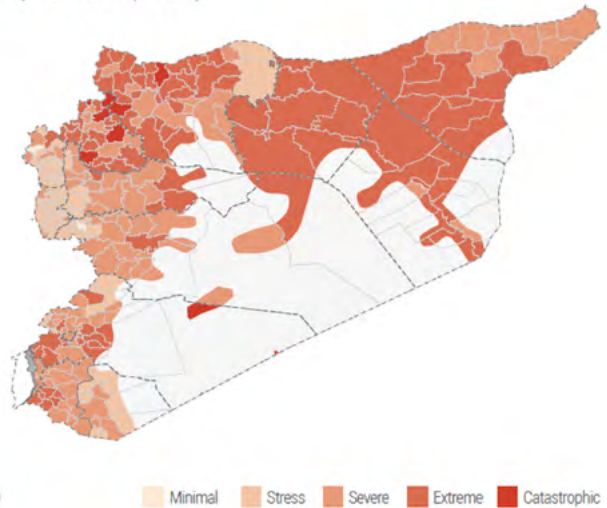
Source: HRP 2021

The majority of those in most severe need are concentrated in the north of the country, in areas outside government control, although there are also high concentrations in urban areas under government control (Aleppo, Homs, Damascus).

Children and women are generally the worst affected by the crisis, and they constitute around 80 per cent of those living in internally displaced person (IDP) settlements. Older people and those living with disabilities are among the other key groups of humanitarian concern, along with displaced people generally.

Although the government has regained control over much of Syria’s territory since

2016, it remains a divided country. With the consolidation of territorial control by the government and opposition factions, the crisis in Syria now extends across three main zones of control. As a result, it cannot truly be described as a single ‘crisis’, but has to be understood across at least three distinct crisis contexts: Government-controlled areas (GCAs) and the two main non-government-controlled areas (non-GCAs) in NWS and northeastern Syria (NES). Although there are multiple common features across all of these ‘sub-crises’, including more recently the threat of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, they pose different threats to the populations concerned and different challenges for those seeking to respond to them.

Figure 2: People in need in Syria**Distribution of People in Need***by sub-district (in 2021)***Inter-sectoral Severity of Needs***by sub-district (in 2021)***The international humanitarian aid context since 2018**

The role of UNICEF in Syria must be understood in the wider context of the international community's efforts to assist Syrians. From 2011 onward, the previous development-oriented United Nations programme has been replaced by successive humanitarian response plans coordinated by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The HRPs detail how the United Nations and its international and national partners intend to respond to the priority needs of the Syrian population.

Because it was difficult for humanitarian actors to access territory that was under the control of the opposition, in July 2014, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passed Security Council Resolution (SCR) 2165. This resolution authorized the United Nations to deliver cross-border humanitarian aid through four points in Jordan, Türkiye and Iraq without the consent of the Syrian government. This led to the creation, in 2015, of the 'Whole of Syria' (WoS) approach, a framework for coordinating aid to both the opposition and Government of Syria-held territories, designed to help harmonize strategy, planning and advocacy across the entire

response, based on information-sharing, ‘joined-up’ needs assessment and joint analysis. Central to this has been the attempt to ensure that major gaps in the response are avoided, areas of unmet need are addressed, and overlapping or conflicting programmes avoided.

Today, the WoS system is still in place. Although initially set up to coordinate the work across multiple hubs, it now facilitates cluster/sector coordination between three hubs: (i) Damascus, (ii) Cross-Border NW Syria and (iii) the NES Forum. The three are coordinated for delivery of the HNO and HRP – in other words, for needs assessment and for overall planning and fundraising for the Syria response.

Syrians are thus reached with humanitarian aid in various ways. To service populations in the non-GCAs of NWS, many United Nations agencies have established offices in Gaziantep, Türkiye. While United Nations staff generally do not cross into Syria from Türkiye, they work with partners with presence in NWS to provide humanitarian aid. In order to service non-GCAs of NES, several United Nations agencies based in Damascus work ‘cross-zone’. Additionally, there are many international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that operate with partners in these areas without permission from the Syrian government. They are coordinated through the NES Forum and a series of working groups in a system that mirrors the standard humanitarian architecture usually led by OCHA.



Insecurity remains a key limiting factor on access for aid organizations. The United Nations and NGOs implement programmes in areas affected by frequent armed clashes, air strikes and regular exchanges of indirect artillery fire and other types of attacks by or among parties to the conflict. As a result of these access challenges, the quantity and quality of reliable data on key humanitarian indicators are poor. The data used to inform the HNOs and subsequent programming are based on annual needs assessments, but many of those interviewed for this evaluation stated that figures presented in the HNO are known to be weak and unreliable. An additional challenge is that for political reasons, the largest donors to the HRP have put conditions on how the funding provided to United Nations agencies and their international and national partners

can be used. Most donors are committed to the approach set out in the Parameters and Principles of United Nations Assistance in Syria, which limits support provided through the HRP to 'life-saving and basic needs'.

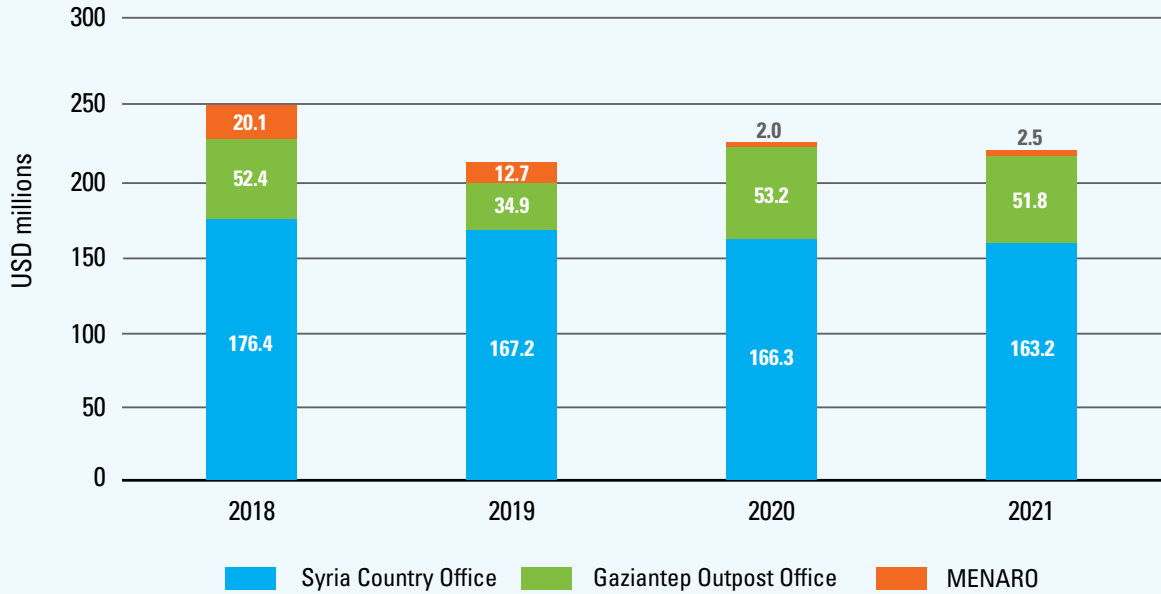
These factors have a direct bearing on the ability of UNICEF to operate in the Syria context, with the result that UNICEF and other agencies have struggled to work on the scale the situation demands. It has also limited opportunities to work on systems, capacity and policy agendas that could bring wider and more sustained benefits to children. This arguably represents the dominant challenge for UNICEF and others: how best to address the effects both of conflict and a sudden massive development deficit using limited humanitarian funding and approaches.

Box 1: Overview of the UNICEF response to the crisis 2018–2021

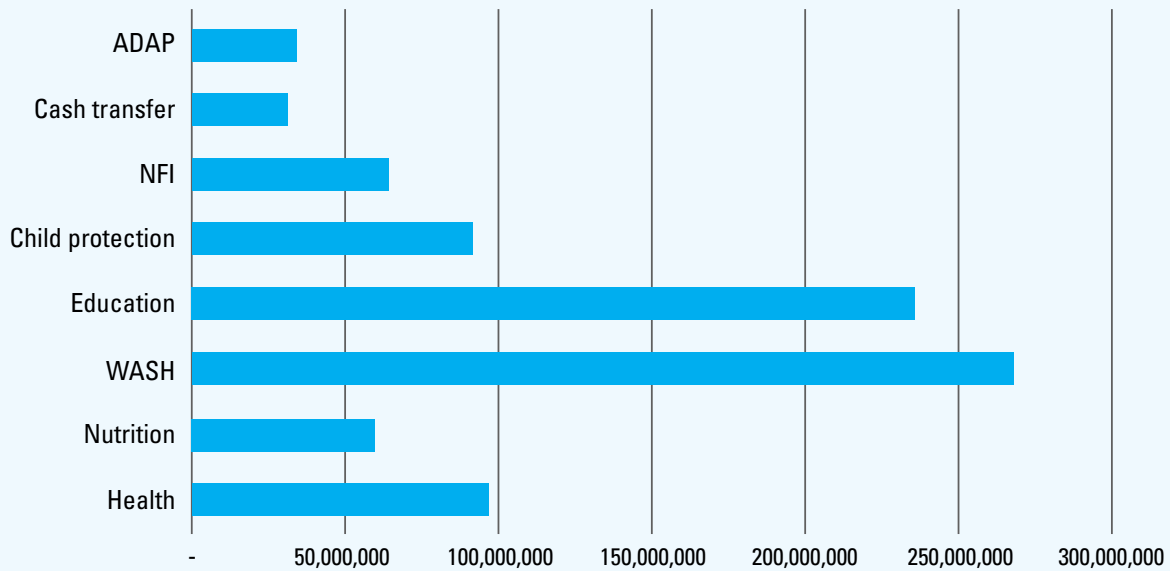
The organization's approach to the WoS agenda has been to operate from two external hubs in addition to the Syria country office in Damascus and its six field offices in Homs, Aleppo, Qamishli, Deir-ez-Zor, Tartous and rural Damascus. From Gaziantep, it has managed and coordinated cross-border responses into non-GCA NWS. Before the UNSC-authorized crossing from Iraq closed in 2020, UNICEF coordinated the cross-border response into NES from MENARO in Amman, Jordan. Today, a team in MENARO coordinates the UNICEF WoS response, including work managed from both Damascus and Gaziantep.

Since 2018, UNICEF has spent over \$900 million on its response in Syria. The majority of funds (between 71 and 78 per cent between 2018–2021) have been managed by the SCO. The Gaziantep office has managed 16-24 per cent of the annual budget over the same period. In 2018 and 2019, MENARO managed 8-9 per cent, and since 2020, 1 per cent.

Funding available by office, 2018 – 2021



Funds available by sector for WoS 2018 – 2021 (USD millions)



In percentage terms, this equates to WASH 30%; education 27%; health 11%; child protection 10%; nutrition 7%; NFIs 7%; cash transfers 4%; ADAP 4%

Evaluation findings and conclusions

UNICEF strategy and Whole of Syria architecture

UNICEF has faced major strategic choices over the course the crisis, including decisions about where and how to work and decisions about the architecture best suited to managing the WoS response. The evaluation concludes that the **strategic decisions made were largely appropriate and remained so throughout the evaluation period**. However, UNICEF has struggled to make a coherent whole of the various parts of its response across the different response hubs inside and outside Syria. This is reflected in the lack of an overarching WoS strategy and the tendency to treat the cross-border work as anomalous or even peripheral to its strategy for Syria. The evaluation found that one reason for this was the **lack of a coherent overall vision for the UNICEF response in Syria**, coupled with a lack of clearly articulated responsibilities and accountabilities for oversight and delivery.

The evaluation team suggests that the wider humanitarian agenda encompasses three priority agendas for children across the whole of Syria. The first (Agenda A) concerns specific emergency or high aid-dependency situations that pose severe, acute threats to child health, well-being

and safety. The second (Agenda B) relates to less acute but widespread, severe and persistent threats to child health, security or well-being. The third (Agenda C) concerns critical threats to child development and life chances, including lack of access to basic education and lack of opportunities for adolescents. These agendas overlap and are causally inter-related: failure to address one risks exacerbating the others. Each agenda requires a different approach. The first typically requires (sustained) direct service delivery, while the second and third require support to existing or new systems of basic service provision. The challenge of achieving scale, quality and complementarity of services is increasingly likely to require area-based, multi-sector and multi-agency approaches.



We believe that UNICEF could frame its current and future agenda in similar terms in order to make sense of different kinds of needs and priorities across the whole of Syria. This would help provide an overarching framework for its decisions about humanitarian priorities and the relationship between them, as well as a programmatic and policy bridge through recovery to future development priorities. It might also help in communicating to others, including donors, the sense of priority attached to these child-focused agendas that are sometimes treated as beyond strictly humanitarian priorities, but which the evaluators believe need to be treated with equal urgency.

Whatever framework it adopts, we believe **UNICEF needs a realistic common planning framework** against which to make decisions about priority interventions in the face of access and resource limits. **This should help enable stronger multi-sector approaches** to be formulated, an area which at the moment is less advanced than it should be. We suggest that a multi-sector planning framework could help to build coherence and deliver greater impact across the programme. One practical starting point for this could be the role of schools as platforms for protection, health, nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions.

UNICEF itself recognizes the need for such integration, but lacks a clear framework for bringing these strands together. Related to

this, the evaluation finds that **UNICEF lacks a framework for decision-making that allows it to prioritize interventions within and across the three main crisis areas**. This should be grounded in current realities (including limits on available funding and access) and should help determine the phasing as well as the combination of different components within a given intervention. It should be practical and capable of being reviewed and revised as situations evolve, and should specify how UNICEF interventions supplement or complement those of others. With regard to policy and advocacy objectives, these should be articulated, including in a rolling plan that is regularly reviewed by managers.

Given the ongoing scale and severity of needs across Syria, the evaluation concludes that **what is required is an evolution of the organization's approach to the humanitarian agenda**. Delivering on its Core Commitments to Children in Humanitarian Action across Syria as a whole requires a balance – depending on the specific context – between continued direct engagement (with partners) in essential service delivery, shifting as far as possible to more sustainable modes of delivery, and support to (or at least complementing of) the relevant official systems of service delivery. Risk communication and related policy and advocacy work are the essential complement to this, and UNICEF has a unique role to play in this regard.

The most immediate challenge facing UNICEF and others is how to maintain coverage of the more acute and high dependency needs (Agenda A) in NWS and NES given the combined constraints of access, authorization, available implementing partners and declining funding. Effective contingency planning for the potential closure of the final border crossing from Türkiye may require a fundamental shift in the current model of engagement, although at the time of the evaluation, there appeared to be limited joint thinking on this between UNICEF hubs.

Overall, it is essential for UNICEF to continue to demonstrate in practice equality of concern for children living in *all* parts of Syria, whether government-controlled or not.

UNICEF performance in leadership and system-wide roles

UNICEF has implemented a wide range of different intervention types over the evaluation period, including emergency interventions (e.g., in Eastern Ghouta 2018, Idlib 2019–2020) and aid to new and existing IDP populations, support to basic service provision for the general population, and policy, advocacy and systems work with the relevant authorities. While programme access and coverage have often been limited, UNICEF has rightly chosen to respond across a broad spectrum of sectoral interventions matching the key threats to children's well-being, security and

development. In addition, the organization's chosen modes of engagement and support – including direct service delivery, technical assistance, supply, coordination, policy and advocacy work – have generally reflected the needs of the wider system, the opportunities available, and the specific competencies and added value of UNICEF.

The evaluation found that while UNICEF has done well to navigate the sensitive political space across different parts of Syria and to find the right roles for itself, it has not always been able to fulfil those roles as it should. Sector leadership and coordination, although just as significant as the UNICEF programme itself, has been lacking in some sectors, largely because UNICEF has struggled to resource this function properly. Within the programme, performance has been mixed, with consequences for children and their families. There are multiple causal factors here, many relating to external constraints – limited funding, donor conditionalities, lack of access, denial of permissions – but others relate to UNICEF performance. The agency's system-wide roles are essential to its added value to the wider Syria response. Any performance deficits in these areas are therefore of particular concern, and **the organization should give as much weight to these roles as it does to delivering its own programme.** This has particular urgency for the functions currently performed for the cross-border programme in NWS and cross-zone in NES.



Coordination

UNICEF (co-)leadership of sectors and sub-sectors is central to its added value, but its record in Syria is highly uneven. Water, sanitation and hygiene and child protection have been strong in most areas of coordination, both at WoS and hub levels, helped by close involvement of senior managers at SCO and regional office levels. These sectors have also shown the potential for effective coordination cross-zone in NES, something on which UNICEF and others should build. In education and nutrition, UNICEF has not been able to provide the consistent leadership needed. Some of this is a matter of resourcing: the evaluation found that the practice of ‘double-’ or even ‘triple-hatting’ has had a negative impact on this aspect of the organization’s role.

Leadership, advocacy and communications

Overall, the evaluation finds that **UNICEF has been a powerful advocate for children in Syria, both through public and private communications, and has led strongly on child-related issues.** This has included campaign work (e.g., back-to-school) as well as a wide range of public communications initiatives. Private communications and advocacy are by their nature difficult to evaluate, but the evaluators found evidence of strong and effective UNICEF engagement with international, national and local political actors on child rights and protection, as well as with key officials across Syria itself. **Some informants raised concerns about the consistency of UNICEF public advocacy, and in particular about its willingness to**

highlight conflict-related violations of child rights (attacks on schools was raised as a particular example).

Supply

The evaluation found that **UNICEF continues to play a crucial role in vaccine supply and distribution** for the health sector, including cold chain provision. Problems with vaccine supply in relation to COVID-19 relate in part to global availability, although **some aspects of the collaboration with the World Health Organization, including around risk communication and addressing vaccine hesitancy, could be strengthened**. The main supply-related issue identified by the evaluation concerned the supply processes in SCO, which have been affected by many factors, external and internal. An internal audit in 2019 reported a **significant problem with delayed procurement**, and while recommendations from that audit are now being implemented, the situation appears not to have been fully resolved.

UNICEF programme strategy and performance

Programme relevance and adaptation to context

The evaluation found that since 2018, **UNICEF has largely managed to implement programmes appropriate to the different contexts of both GCAs and non-GCAs and to adapt its approach to changing circumstances** over the evaluation period.

More challenges were encountered in the non-GCAs, partly due to the complexity and largely 'arms-length' nature of the related modalities.

Within this overall picture there is considerable variation. In **areas of the northwest beyond government control, the evaluation found that UNICEF had overall found the right roles for itself within the largely Agenda A context** (emergency and high dependency) that has characterized this region since 2018. These have included emergency WASH and health and nutrition work (including COVID-19 vaccination), as well as support to community- and centre-based child protection services. UNICEF and its partners have done well to adapt to the rapidly evolving context, including mass displacements in 2019–2020. Education in NWS has been more problematic and more limited in its coverage and impact.

In **non-government held areas of the northeast**, UNICEF was obliged to adapt its programmes following closure of the border to the United Nations in January 2020, following which most UNICEF programming was enabled through the Damascus and Qamishli offices through increased 'cross-zone' operations. These remained limited in scale at the time of writing. Since that time, **the evaluation found positive examples of programme adaptation**, particularly in health and WASH, while the nutrition and education programmes

faced more challenges – although here and elsewhere across Syria, UNICEF has done well to depoliticize the education agenda and support multiple pathways for children to learn and gain accreditation after years of disruption. Complex work on child protection, including work with third-country nationals and children associated with armed forces and armed groups, has been innovative and appropriate, and a good demonstration of the organization's added value.

The organization's work in GCAs over the evaluation period has seen increasing engagement with government counterparts and local administrations, which has allowed UNICEF to pursue a shift towards a recovery strategy, tackling Agendas B and C (basic service strengthening, rehabilitation, etc.), although this remains constrained by multiple factors. This approach is appropriate given the relative stability of the environment of GCAs, and reflects the need for approaches that go beyond relief and service delivery. However, UNICEF interventions are often dwarfed by the scale of destruction of systems and infrastructure, the effects of the economic collapse, and the loss of professional personnel, particularly in health, education and WASH. Donor conditionalities on funding in GCAs have heavily constrained work on education and adolescent development and participation in particular and have severely limited UNICEF support to the formal education system.

Programme strategy and planning

The 2016 country programme document (CPD) for Syria has been rolled over year after year, while the situation in the country has changed dramatically and the programme has in practice been continually adapted. **The approach to strategy over this period is best described as ad hoc, reactive and opportunistic**, both in areas covered by the CPD and more generally across WoS. While this is understandable, **the lack of a unifying UNICEF humanitarian strategy has been a significant gap** and appears even more so as the situation has stabilized.

Different approaches to strategy have been taken across the three crisis areas. The sector strategies set out in the programme strategy notes (PSNs) designed to support the CPD are more obviously tailored to the context of government-controlled areas of Syria and the relatively stable areas in which the relevant government ministries and local authorities have responsibility for delivering essential services for children. While emergency response capacity is maintained within the office, such response has progressively decreased and represents a relatively small part of current UNICEF interventions in GCAs. **This leaves a gap in the logic and planning for the current situation in GCAs**, in which the conditions largely do not exist to implement the PSN strategies, but where the situation does not fit the 'standard' humanitarian model.

The humanitarian situation in non-government-controlled areas of NWS and NES better fits the standard model. Yet no clear overall strategy has been articulated for these specific contexts or for related cross-border and cross-zone or cross-line support, and this is a gap that needs to be filled. Particularly in NES, the ad hoc approach to work in these areas can no longer be justified in what has become a relatively stable and protracted situation.

Programme coverage and targeting

Across all sectors, UNICEF and the relevant clusters have targeted (but not always met) around 70-80 per cent of the assessed needs. Within that figure, **target achievement has been variable across sectors and regions**. While some sectors (WASH, health) have achieved relatively high coverage, others have been unable to achieve adequate coverage. **Evaluating UNICEF programme coverage against assessed needs proved difficult given major uncertainties concerning the reliability of system-wide needs assessment data and related 'people in need' figures**. The specific impacts of the crisis on children were often assumed rather than assessed, with access for assessment severely limited across the whole country. Likewise, UNICEF figures for 'reach' are based on achievement of output delivery targets (as assessed by partners,

third-party monitors and facilitators) rather than being based on data and feedback concerning benefits actually delivered. Targeting has often been influenced as much by opportunities to programme as by assessed needs and priorities.

Programme coherence

An important question for the evaluation was how well integrated the different components of the UNICEF programme have been, and in particular whether the different sectoral interventions were mutually reinforcing. **A considerable degree of effective inter-sector planning and delivery was found in the sectors that have traditionally been associated with each other** (e.g., child protection and education and WASH in schools). **However, the integration of different sectoral interventions was found to have been largely ad hoc and opportunistic rather than planned as part of a deliberate strategy**. The evaluators recognize the challenges involved, particularly in GCAs, where multi-sector programming often requires engagement with numerous different ministries, requiring in some cases formal vetting of all UNICEF interventions. **A more strategic approach to programming, based on an agreed inter-sector planning framework, would help to ensure more consistent delivery of multi-sector interventions**.

Programme effectiveness

While the evaluation draws some specific conclusions about the effectiveness of particular programme elements, **the ability of UNICEF to gauge the effectiveness of its interventions suffers from many of the same limitations noted above with regard to needs assessment and coverage.** Assessing whether a given programme intervention achieved the desired result has relied too heavily on output delivery / target achievement data and the logic of the programme itself. **The lack of feedback from communities themselves is one essential missing component here, as is outcome data more generally.** Although progress has been made in this regard, UNICEF itself acknowledges the need to find better ways of establishing that its interventions and those of its partners are having the desired effect. The importance of the UNICEF role in public health risk communication and in related programming (vaccination, including COVID-19, WASH) emerges as one clear area of major impact for which effectiveness can be reasonably inferred from the level of coverage.

Collaborations, partnerships and community engagement

Working relationships with sister United Nations agencies and with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) were found generally to have been constructive and effective, although there are significant areas in which



these need to be strengthened. Its working relationships with NGOs – local, national and international – have varied in quality and type across the three main crisis areas, in part because of restrictions on partnerships and partner presence. UNICEF lacks some usual key partner international NGOs, but there remains more scope for international NGO partnerships in Damascus and beyond. Its partnerships with local NGOs in all three areas are central to the implementation of the UNICEF programme, and from a wider perspective, they are also essential to the effective resourcing, support and capacity-building of Syrian NGOs, who have been key actors in the delivery of essential services across WoS. UNICEF technical support and capacity-building of NGOs has been particularly valued.

The evaluation found that accountability to affected populations (AAP), and more generally, engagement with communities, has been one of the weakest aspects of UNICEF practice to date. This is related to the lack of UNICEF presence in many areas, necessitating a 'remote' approach that relies on third parties to engage with communities. In recognition of this, UNICEF (particularly SCO) has taken steps to enhance its ability to gain feedback from communities, but the relative lack of proximity and community engagement remains a significant constraint on the organization's ability to account for, and ensure the relevance and effectiveness of, its interventions.

Management and operational support

The evaluation found that **overall, the WoS arrangement has been effective** in enabling UNICEF to respond without excessive political interference. But like other agencies working with WoS structures, **UNICEF has struggled to make a coherent whole of the various parts of its response across the different response hubs.** The UNICEF WoS arrangement was established when there were a number of active UNSC-authorized border crossings providing support into Syria from Türkiye, Jordan and Iraq. This was clearly appropriate and necessary at the time due to the need for a remote management, coordination and oversight function in a secure location. **With the closure of all but one of the UNSC-authorized cross-border routes in 2020, the rationale for the current**

structure has become less clear, and the high cost of maintaining it somewhat harder to justify in the face of declining funding. Because it has no direct presence in non-GCAs of NWS, UNICEF has very limited ability to 'read' the context and assess changing needs, and cannot engage directly with communities. This 'arm's-length' approach raises questions about oversight, effectiveness and quality assurance (entirely reliant on partner self-reporting supplemented by third-party monitoring). The question for UNICEF is what role it should continue to play in this endeavour and where its added value lies. This is likely to require capacity in the Gaziantep office to be maintained at least at current levels, even if the functions are reconfigured.

Cross-cutting issues

Humanitarian principles were considered across various aspects of the UNICEF response. Largely for reasons of operating restrictions and lack of data, **UNICEF cannot say with confidence that it has always responded on the basis of (assessed) need.** Although the evaluation found that the response was broadly equitable and needs-based, **some priority agendas have been under-served.** Greater transparency concerning operational limitations would help to address potential concerns about lack of independence. The evaluation found that **UNICEF engagement with the Government of Syria and with de facto authorities in areas outside government control had been**



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appropriate and necessary. Nevertheless, more work is needed to establish in practice the principle of independence.

The gender-related aspects of the crisis were found generally to have been well reflected in the UNICEF response, particularly with regard to girls' access to primary education. However, given the highly gendered impacts of the crisis – including the vulnerabilities of women and girls in particular to violence and coercion – this remains a crucial area of concern and one on which UNICEF should continue to work closely with other agencies. The situation of adolescents (girls and boys), including access to education and training, and related issues of child labour and early marriage, is an area that needs more international attention, and UNICEF has an important role to play here.

According to the 2022 HNO, of the 14.6 million people in need inside Syria, some 4.2 million people have a disability. The majority of **children with disabilities** aged 12–17 are not attending school and households that have persons with disabilities are some of the most vulnerable in Syria, both in terms of access to basic needs and protection. UNICEF has done important work to support such households through its education and social protection programmes (notably in its disability programming in Aleppo) but it has not been able to mount such work on a scale commensurate with need. **Given both the priority of the need and the impact that UNICEF has demonstrated in this area, the evaluation concluded that this should be a priority for future action.**

Recommendations

The evaluation makes recommendations under the following headings, recognizing that many of these issues are acknowledged by UNICEF and some progress has already been made on the agendas listed here. Implementation of some of these recommendations also depends on factors such as funding and access (in some areas) over which UNICEF has limited control or influence. The recommendations should be read in that light.

R1. Reframe the Whole of Syria agenda and related humanitarian strategy

The UNICEF crisis response in Syria, for all its strengths, has been hampered by the lack of a coherent strategy for its humanitarian work. Disconnected strategies across the whole of Syria have reflected the fragmentation of the country: cross-border and cross-line efforts have not been well harmonized, and both appear to be disconnected from work in GCAs. Over the course of the evaluation period, the humanitarian situation in Syria has largely evolved into three distinct crises, each posing different challenges for humanitarian response and recovery efforts. UNICEF needs to find a way to encompass these within a single strategy and analytical framework. Doing so requires fully recognizing the scale of the overall humanitarian crisis and the distinct characteristics and priorities of each

‘sub-crisis’, as well as the linkages between them. While the political and security context (national and international) will largely continue to define what is possible by way of effective intervention, UNICEF must maintain the position that its mandate applies to all children equally across Syria, and that this requires it to work across political boundaries. This should be the foundation of discussions with both the Government of Syria (GoS) and with de facto authorities in NWS and NES.

R2. Review Whole of Syria arrangements

The UNICEF WoS arrangement needs to evolve to reflect the change of circumstances since it was established while maintaining certain key functions. Specifically, it needs to provide a stronger platform for assessing needs and coordinating interventions to all parts of Syria according to a common humanitarian strategy and plan. This includes much stronger harmonization of cross-border and cross-line support. The WoS office in Amman and SCO need to collaborate closely on this agenda.

More generally, the arrangements need to provide a clearer framework of responsibilities and accountabilities for each hub and the functions located within them. Lack of clarity on this has been a significant barrier to effective and harmonized working for UNICEF across WoS.

R3. Ensure continuity of Agenda A support to areas of northwestern Syria outside GoS control, while adapting the support strategy to reflect the evolving situation

Ensuring continuity of support for the needs of children and their families in NWS must continue to be a priority for UNICEF, given the scale and severity of needs involved. The situation remains fluid and levels of vulnerability (as well as levels of aid dependency) are high. Uncertainty over the future of cross-border support and challenges to increasing cross-line support from GCAs add to that vulnerability and planning against future scenarios is an immediate priority.

R4. Repurpose the strategy for support to non-government-controlled areas of north-eastern Syria

UNICEF has made real strides in opening space and responding to critical needs, but there are key service gaps (e.g., in nutrition and education) and the scale and coverage are insufficient, particularly in areas outside the formal IDP camps. Progressively extending the support provided cross-zone will require closer collaboration with NGOs as well as de facto authorities (Self-Administration) together with higher-level advocacy to increase the operating space. Doing this will

involve rebuilding trust and will require more transparency and better communication on both sides. This is also essential for securing the trust of donors, who currently express understandable confusion as to the nature and extent of aid efforts in NES (by UNICEF and others) and concern at the lack of coordination and collaboration between the United Nations and NGOs. For its part, UNICEF must be more open about the extent and limits of its ability to support work cross-zone, even within the camps where it currently operates.

R5. Build the scale of work in GCAs through enhanced partnerships and consortia

UNICEF has done well to work with national and local authorities, SARC and approved NGOs in GCAs despite the multiple limitations imposed by donor conditionalities, as well as limits imposed by the government on needs assessment and response. The main challenge identified by the evaluation is one of scale: UNICEF needs to find ways to better address the humanitarian agenda for children in GCAs at scale, through wider partnerships, integrated programming and area-based approaches. While this is dependent on donor willingness to fund as well as GoS permissions, joint inter-agency approaches – possibly using consortium or event joint venture models – could help to provide assurance as well as a potential scale multiplier effect.

R6. Address critical service gaps and maintain key services

Consistent with the wider humanitarian strategy, UNICEF should identify critical service gaps across the whole of Syria, analyse the reasons behind them, and take steps to address them as a matter of priority. Some of these (nutrition is a key example) cannot wait. Others may take some time to address but should be treated with the urgency they deserve. Some demand strengthening not only the UNICEF programme response but that of the wider sector, including coordination.

R7. Strengthen needs assessment, situational monitoring and targeting across WoS

Related to R4 above, UNICEF needs a plan to strengthen its ability – and that of the sectors for which it has lead responsibilities – to better gauge the evolving picture of needs and vulnerabilities across all parts of Syria, including with regard to under-5 malnutrition. The methods employed may vary somewhat across the three crisis areas, but a common analytical framework should be used at sector and inter-sector levels. This needs to allow for more ‘real-time’ and baseline data gathering.



R8. Strengthen monitoring and accounting for programme delivery and performance

UNICEF needs to be better able to account (internally and externally) for its programme interventions through partners in all parts of Syria. The inability to do so reliably is a reputational risk and means that UNICEF lacks a sound basis for programme management. As part of this, UNICEF needs to be significantly more transparent in reporting both what it does (and where), and what it is unable to do. It also needs to ensure comparable transparency concerning the work of clusters and areas of responsibility (AoRs) for which it has lead responsibilities.

R9. Strengthen cluster and AoR leadership and coordination

While in some sectors, UNICEF leadership and coordination have been strong, in other areas they have been relatively weak at both hub and WoS levels. UNICEF must make sure that its own programme delivery is not privileged over fulfilment of its essential system-wide roles. Double- and triple-hatting has seriously affected UNICEF performance and the well-being of the staff concerned.

R10. Strengthen the supply function

Supply for the programme in GCAs and cross-line in NES has been a persistent problem, related in part to the economic

crises in Syria and Lebanon. The SCO should request expert support from the Middle East and North Africa Regional Office (MENARO) or Copenhagen to help identify steps necessary for improvements, as well as to provide general support to the supply section. A head of section needs to be recruited as soon as possible. The evaluation suggests that a task team be established, including programme and fundraising staff, to monitor progress on agreed steps and report to senior managers on progress. This is a core function for UNICEF, the performance of which has system-wide implications.

R11. Enhance risk management and control processes

While UNICEF risk management and control processes appear relatively strong, the review of risks should happen more regularly than it does at present (we suggest quarterly). Collaboration on due diligence and spot checks under the harmonized approach to cash transfers (HACT) system could be extended beyond the current United Nations partners. On safeguarding and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, while good progress is being made internally, more needs to be done to raise awareness amongst beneficiaries and establish case management protocols at a community level. Continued advocacy at a governmental level is required to enable wider progress on this agenda.

R12. Strengthen communication and advocacy efforts

While UNICEF (SCO/MENARO) has made good use of private advocacy channels with authorities across Syria and in the wider region over the evaluation period, it needs to be more consistent and responsive in its public advocacy and condemnations of gross abuses of child rights (it has sometimes been too risk-averse in this regard). Such communication needs to be distinguished from communications designed primarily to promote UNICEF and its work. The current practice of routing such advocacy mainly through MENARO is appropriate.

While UNICEF has tended to highlight its own (positive) role, not enough communication work is done to highlight the gaps in coverage for children across WoS, and particularly in NWS. Given the limited presence of international NGOs across the various hubs, this is an especially important agenda for UNICEF. An advocacy strategy and rollout plan should form part of the proposed humanitarian strategy and plan (R1).

For further information, please contact:

Evaluation Office
United Nations Children's Fund
Three United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017
USA



www.unicef.org/evaluation/



UNICEF-Evaluation



evalhelp@unicef.org

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