

Evaluability Assessment and Formative Evaluation of UNICEF's Approaches to Advocacy

Case Study 3: GAP 3, The integration of advocacy
approaches to mental health in National Committees
with a focus on migration in the case of Italy

Evaluation Office
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RATIONALE

The Global Advocacy Priority (GAP) 3 addresses four advocacy outcomes, aiming at (1) increasing mental health spending in targeted countries, (2) ensuring targeted countries implement publicly funded parent support programmes, (3) enhancing national school policies on promotive, preventive and responsive mental health and well-being and (4) strengthening the engagement and behavioural change of young people, and parents/caregivers in promoting and seeking well-being for themselves and others.

This case study focused on **advocacy strategies for mental health, considering one of the main outcomes for the global priority Outcome 3**: enhancing national school policies on promotive, preventive and responsive mental health and well-being – which is aligned to Outcome 3 of the mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) theory of change (ToC) of the Italian National Committee (NatCom) focused on strengthening learning environments. The case study analysed the integration of the advocacy approaches, and the extent to which the logic of the NatCom ToC contributes to GAP3, with a specific focus on the advocacy on stigma and access to services to support children with a migratory background, both first and second generation.

This case study aimed to address all key criteria considered for the evaluation, with a focus on **coherence, as well as system and implementation capacities**, studying how the advocacy strategy translates into a strategic allocation of resources and is integrated at the country level to foster advocacy and related results, specifically in the area of mental health. Whereas other case studies might put more emphasis on the design and approaches, this case study provided valuable insights on direct implementation mechanisms. Based on the advocacy approaches included in the GAP3 ToC, the case study addressed private influencing, coalition forming, mobilizing the public and generating evidence. The choice of this case study was also informed by the relevance of existing evidence on previous success, results and impact, the opportunity to test implementation and capacity, sample variance maximization through the fact that it focuses on a high-income country¹, and the relevance given by key informants to this particular case for the analysis of advocacy approaches within GAP3.

BACKGROUND

In 2019, prior to the pandemic, only 30 per cent of children with neuropsychological disorders had access to a local neuro-psychiatric service for children and adolescents (NPIA). Out of those, only 15 per cent received proper therapeutic-rehabilitative responses. Furthermore, in 2018, only 31 per cent of NPIA disorder admissions were in NPIA wards while the other 69 per cent were in adult or general paediatric wards, leading to a high risk of inappropriate care. There were 394 ordinary NPIA inpatient beds nationally in 2019, which accounted for 6 per cent of the total 6,201 paediatric inpatient beds that year. Admissions for NPIA disorders made up 19 per cent of total paediatric admissions. It is important to note that psychosocial and mental health services for migrant and refugee children are not sufficient or fully suitable to meet their needs.

Outcome 3 of the ToC for the Italy NatCom focuses on promoting MHPSS in childcare, pre-primary and school settings. Key interventions include addressing MHPSS needs through child rights education and baby friendly initiatives, developing capacity-building programmes for personnel, creating an enabling learning environment through suitable mental health policies and curricula, and supporting the well-being of childcare providers and teachers through relevant policies and services.

There are 33 NatComs in high-income countries, including Italy, with two primary objectives: fundraising and advocacy. The Italian NatCom is unique due to its robust network of 5,500 registered and insured volunteers who also sign an ethical code, committing to UNICEF's mission. Becoming a volunteer involves a process, and their work is highly valued due to their widespread presence across Italy. The monitoring process ensures the effectiveness and quality of volunteer efforts. The NatCom has volunteers throughout the main cities of Italy, forming 120 subcommittees for local advocacy efforts. The Italian National Committee's advocacy unit consists of 10–12

1 <https://data.worldbank.org/country/IT>

people, divided into international, institutional and local advocacy teams, as well as domestic programmes such as schools, universities, and the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative. The organization has approximately 140 staff members; most focus on fundraising, while some work on central functions such as HR and finance.

The Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) was stationed in Italy originally to address the migration and refugee crisis that began in 2016. Their main focus is to support the Ministry of Interior on migration issues and safeguard unaccompanied and separated children. Initially consisting of only two members focused on child protection, it expanded to include an adolescent section and added a gender-based violence component in 2019. Over the past two years, the ECARO outpost office in Rome has expanded its scope to assist not just migrants and refugees, but also other vulnerable groups. The office has secured additional grants and European Union connections. The team has added more staff members, including consultants, and now has an increased presence throughout Italy.

FINDINGS SPECIFIC TO ADVOCACY COHERENCE

Given the context of the case study, this section addresses the extent to which UNICEF staff and key external advocacy stakeholders have a clear and shared understanding of what advocacy is and what advocacy work entails (and how it relates to communication), and how to achieve advocacy goals. In the context of this particular case study, it focuses on the extent to which there is a shared understanding of advocacy for GAP3 on MHPSS between the NatCom, ECARO and HQ.

In general, informants from both the NatCom and HQ expressed a shared understanding of what advocacy means, linking advocacy to institutional activities and lobbying efforts with government politicians. This shared understanding also emphasizes the challenge of finding the right balance between maintaining a healthy relationship with donor institutions and advocating effectively for children's rights. Informants from the Dutch NatCom that complement the views of the Italian NatCom also confirmed having a similar vision of advocacy as the Global Communication and Advocacy (GCA) Team in New York.

Nonetheless, there are still issues to be resolved when it comes to clearly differentiating advocacy roles, mainly between the NatCom and ECARO. The idea shared by representatives from both entities mainly points to having different views when it comes to differentiating between advocacy and technical assistance. NatComs are not permitted to offer technical assistance, but in some scenarios the differences between the two concepts can be blurred. Advocacy actions require a thorough understanding of the issue of focus, including all the related and detailed technical aspects. Otherwise, the risk is that advocacy actions are not based on evidence and become 'empty boxes'. Providing technical assistance instead requires putting in place technical actions/interventions to overcome the challenges and gaps. That is why the collaboration (and complementarity) with ECARO in shaping joint advocacy actions is so crucial.

In addition, one relevant informant from the GAP3 team at HQ highlights that knowledge in the advocacy field is evolving and growing within UNICEF. GCA aims to build a global understanding of advocacy. However, it is pointed out that many colleagues still confuse advocacy with communications, C4D, partnership work, and fundraising. This area of growth remains a challenge for UNICEF.

FINDINGS SPECIFIC TO RELEVANCE

Given the context of the case study, this section addresses the pertinence of the GAP3 and global advocacy strategies at the NatCom level. In the context of this particular case study, it focuses on the extent to which UNICEF's Global Mental Health Advocacy Strategy was relevant for the case of the Italian NatCom.

In the process of defining the global strategies for UNICEF Italy, a prioritization workshop was held, with the participation of the Italian NatCom, ECARO, and the Innocenti Research Centre. The goal was to create a unified UNICEF approach. The workshop took place in October 2021 and resulted in the selection of four national priorities: mental health and psychosocial support, non-discrimination, quality education (which is not the same as the learning crisis addressed in GAP2), and environment and sustainability (climate change). Three of these priorities align with global advocacy issues (education, mental health and climate change). Non-discrimination plays a crucial role in addressing child poverty, migration (the priority for ECARO), and children with disabilities. These priorities align with some of the GAPs but primarily reference the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The office sought to establish national priorities independently from the GAPs. Once these had been identified, they used UNICEF's global frameworks and ToC, studying international guidelines.

FINDINGS SPECIFIC TO THE VALIDITY OF DESIGN

In the context of this case study, the section focuses on the extent to which specific advocacy strategies were developed for MHPSS, and specifically advocacy approaches on stigma and access to services to support children with a migratory background, both first and second generation.

Development of the advocacy strategy for MHPSS

Support received from HQ to implement relevant advocacy approaches for MHPSS.

The support from HQ to develop the subsequent MHPSS advocacy strategy was provided by both GCA and thematic experts from Programme Group (PG). New York provided specific advice on the existing GAP3 priorities, with a technical focus. ECARO Geneva helped with processes relating to planning and establishing a ToC for UNICEF's new priorities. Both offices have been engaged since the beginning in helping develop advocacy strategies at the national level, and their assistance has been highly regarded by relevant informants at the NatCom. The goal was to support NatComs in developing a strategy concerning mental health and psychosocial support, specific to their context and linked to the GAP. They ensure NatComs develop two strategies: one focusing on broader advocacy with mental health as a minor component, and the other an overarching mental health strategy aligning with UNICEF's global framework published earlier in 2023. The challenge lies in helping NatComs link the two frameworks without duplicating efforts or resources.

The availability of ToC to understand how relevant advocacy strategies are to unfold.

One ToC was developed for each of the priorities identified. The mental health advocacy strategy was subsequently developed. The NatCom has also developed a ToC for non-discrimination and quality education. These three areas need to be interconnected, as the output on learning environment is included in all of them. The approach to MHPSS is based on the international framework and the MHPSS GAP3. The mental health ToC was informed by a series of key documents, including UNICEF's strategic plan and global strategic priorities, among others. The team received training on various aspects of developing a ToC. They then created a draft and held numerous meetings with HQ to ensure alignment with the overall GAP3 strategy. The last Global Summit on Mental Health was held in Rome on 13 and 14 October 2022, and its outcomes strongly influenced the ToC developed.

The ToC was validated by focal points from Private Fundraising and Partnerships (PFP) and PG. A workshop was held with the ECARO team in Rome to identify synergies and collaboration opportunities since both teams work in this area. The goal was to align ECARO with the NatCom and move beyond information-sharing to establish a joint programming framework. This shift would lead to collaborative action and improved results for both entities. It is important to note that the NatCom does not provide technical assistance or psychological support directly. Instead, its focus is on reducing stigma, improving parenting and MHPSS, advocating for increased investment in MHPSS by institutions, and raising public awareness of available services. To accomplish these objectives, the NatCom adopts the international framework at a national level for advocacy purposes.

The NatCom had no experience working on MHPSS, and instead of starting the strategy from scratch, UNICEF's global wealth of information, guidelines and best practices were considered. These resources were leveraged and adapted to the specific context for increased efficiency and effectiveness. During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous NatComs began to work on MHPSS as mental health issues became more common. This collaboration occurred simultaneously with PFP's development of a work strategy plan. However, the limited number of HQ staff could not adequately support all the NatComs. Mental health has become a primary focus in political elections and is included in the agenda for Italy.

Synergies between MHPSS work in the NatCom and other GAP areas and other relevant advocacy areas.

Several examples of synergies sought between the priority on MHPSS and other GAPs were identified, as follows:

Education: Informants from the NatCom described how mental health is a key issue when the NatCom works in schools. Mention was also made of the increased interest of young people in climate change, and its connection to these priorities. Another informant at the global level emphasized the importance of mental health in schools, asserting that it goes beyond implementing programmes and ensuring students feel connected and have a sense of belonging. A call to action, led by UNICEF with support from WHO and UNESCO, was formed through collaboration between GAP2 and GAP3. The goal is to encourage governments to implement mental health programmes in schools effectively. Informants also highlighted the connection between quality education and discrimination, reflected in the current theory of change in the context of MHPSS in schools. The focus is on advocating for MHPSS as an essential part of quality education, rather than providing technical assistance. Additionally, mental health is integrated into initiatives with child-friendly schools.

Climate: Another informant at the HQ level highlighted the prioritization of climate and migration issues within UNICEF and their intersection with mental health. The HQ works on developing messaging and guidance for NatComs. HQ provides technical guidance and information upon request, for example crafting key messages for events like Climate Day or Earth Day, focusing on the link between climate change and mental health.

Nutrition: A programme centred on breastfeeding, with a permanent working group including the health ministry and UNICEF Italy was also identified. A joint document addressing the link between breastfeeding and maternal mental health will be released in 2023.

Migration: There was acknowledgement of the significance of considering migration as a factor directly linked to all other concerns. The informants mention the involvement of young boys and girls from migrant backgrounds in mental health-related activities through the Youth Advisory Board. They participate actively in polls, communication campaigns and special events. The "OPS!" campaign led by ECARO, particularly held on the day against racism in March 2023, addresses bias, discrimination and mental health issues faced by children with migratory backgrounds. The focus on mental health in these campaigns is a crucial aspect of their work.

Potential areas for collaboration. The advocacy team has successfully established their priorities, and it is acknowledged that it would be interesting to integrate MHPSS with other areas of the NatComs work, such as climate change (specifically, eco-anxiety). Recognizing that this integration is a gradual process, throughout the first year the NatCom has focused on establishing a planning system, building an institutional network, designing social mobilization messaging, managing existing partnerships, and identifying key partners to accelerate their efforts in merging MHPSS with other work areas. The relevant informant at HQ also emphasized the importance of integrating MHPSS into various areas, moving beyond its traditional limited role within child protection during disaster situations. Also, ongoing efforts by headquarters to incorporate MHPSS in education, health, WASH, nutrition and social policies were mentioned.

Additionally, there is an effort to incorporate mental health into joint activities involving fundraising and communications, including specific petition-related tasks.

Nonetheless, a relevant informant at the global level stressed that there is no need to force synergies across GAPs just for the sake of it. The example of climate anxiety is presented, which is a normal response to an extraordinary situation and not a mental health issue, as having appropriate emotions at the right time is crucial for adolescent brain development. The informant also criticizes the wellness industry for promoting the idea that everyone should be happy all the time, which can be unhealthy for children. The informant highlights that forcing synergies on unrelated topics poses a reputational risk for organizations, as it can lead to a loss of credibility within academic and professional communities. The informant suggests that synergies should only be promoted when they provide genuine value.

Usefulness of the GAP structure to do advocacy work for the Italy NatCom. Integration of the GAP.

The NatCom was reported to frequently receive updates regarding HQ and PFP mailing lists on MHPSS, ensuring awareness of changes to the framework. In their bimonthly calls, NatComs, and representatives from HQ and PFP, collaborate to remain aligned, learn from other NatComs and discuss MHPSS strategies. The group is actively learning through their actions and working together to accomplish their goals regarding mental health. Another informant from the NatCom highlighted the importance of Geneva and New York as headquarters for facilitating joint strategic plans and activities. Overall, Geneva plays a crucial role in peer communication, bridging connections with NatComs, and providing useful tools for efficient work processes and integration. New York is providing the NatCom with advice on the integration of GAP3. It is emphasized that this collaboration should be continuous and not dependent on personal availability.

One informant from HQ expressed concern about overloading NatComs with tasks related to conceptualization and theory building, given their limited interactions with HQ due to remote work conditions. The informant expresses a hope for the NatComs to feel supported in their efforts to develop strategies and receive feedback. There is a recognition of the challenges faced on the ground and a desire to fill gaps from the HQ.

Level of flexibility allowed to adapt to changing environments and context. Examples of Italy in the areas covered.

Informants from both HQ and the NatCom expressed satisfaction in their ability to be flexible in delivering advocacy initiatives. They emphasized flexibility as a crucial aspect of their advocacy work. Adaptability is maintained in alignment with the core organization's principles, ensuring openness to change without adhering to specific ideologies. As an example, informants referred to the change in the Italian Government and its potential impact on migration policies, and how this led to re-evaluating the work done with the Ministry of Interior, focusing on identifying possible modifications and maintaining cooperation that aligns with UNICEF's core values and mission. The current momentum is seen as an opportunity for effective work in addressing delicate and challenging issues in mental health.

At the HQ level, the work is also considered highly adaptable, mainly relying on the NatCom, RO and CO colleagues as the key for adequately contextualizing UNICEF's initiatives on the ground. Colleagues in these institutions, often nationals of the countries in question, have a deeper understanding of local political, social and environmental contexts, which enables them to effectively implement advocacy efforts on certain topics. In this connection, the NatCom plays a vital role in devising contextually appropriate ideas and messaging. UNICEF HQ then offers technical review and input, ensuring that the content aligns with its standards and addresses safeguarding and protection concerns. This collaboration allows for a strong reliance on contextual understanding in addressing sensitive topics.

Strategies considered to develop/sustain advocacy partnership at the NatCom, and extent to which the Partnership Management Toolbox is considered. Extent to which clear procedure partnering is established.

When it comes to the Italian NatCom, partnerships are formed with clear memorandums of understanding (MoUs). These outline the mutual responsibilities and limitations, ensuring both parties understand their roles. For added security, the legal office revises these MoUs, adhering to strict government policies, ethical codes and privacy concerns. This approach guarantees high-quality work without compromising any standards. The approach involves signing MoUs with national and regional institutions, due to the decentralized nature of Italian institutional architecture. They work at both national and regional levels, using volunteers at the local level. Except the partnership with the Gemelli Hospital, partnerships are pro bono and do not involve any financial transactions.

The NatCom collaborates with partners from various sectors, including institutional partners like the Ministries of Health, Education and Labour, and professionals such as psychologists and social workers. These collaborations assist in analysing the situation in Italy and identifying advocacy areas. NatCom also works with the National Authority for Children and research offices to gain a better understanding of the context, and engages with the third sector – NGOs and associations, forming part of numerous associative networks that lobby for different themes. Emphasizing the inclusion of mental health in the work with the government, the NatCom has submitted a specific request about mental health in the agenda for the new government. The NatCom is also closely monitoring governmental and parliamentary actions related to mental health issues. This includes tracking draft bills and action plans to ensure progress in addressing these crucial concerns.

For example, the NatCom has a partnership with the Gemelli Hospital that involves two main aspects: direct management of adolescents with mental health issues by the Gemelli team, and an emphasis on prevention and promotion of mental health through capacity-building opportunities in schools. Another relevant partnership in the mental health area is the collaboration with Italy's child Ombudsman, Autorità Garante per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza, on a broad agenda, including MHPSS. The Ombudsman has published a noteworthy report on youth mental health by, offering numerous recommendations for government and civil society. The aim is to work closely with the Ombudsman to use these recommendations for advocacy actions.

NatCom representative expressed the desire to conduct in-depth research on systemic gaps in MHPSS, exploring various aspects such as human resources, budget coordination, policy implementation, and more. However, the NatCom faces challenges in funding and is currently trying to identify partners with the necessary technical and financial capacity to support this project. In return, they can offer UNICEF's reputation, network, reach, and social media presence, which engages their audience effectively across different platforms.

Concerning ECARO, the office operates through implementing partners, and emphasizes that they do not provide direct services. Their activities include engaging in dialogues with partners about goals, technical oversight, and ensuring quality assurance. ECARO maintains a different relationship with associations than the NatCom, by forming deals and contracts with other NGOs, including Save the Children and Médecins sans frontières (Doctors Without Borders) for the provision of services.

ECARO operates in partnership with Save the Children, offering fully integrated and mainstream MHPSS services. From the disembarkation phase, they provide psychological first aid (PFA) when necessary, supported by psychologists employed by Save the Children with UNICEF funds. They continue to follow up with identified cases as individuals enter the first-line reception system within the extraordinary reception system. The process involves identifying specific mental health vulnerabilities and referring cases to specialized services when necessary. With a strong network and clear understanding of effective services in the field, the goal is to ensure quality intervention for children, families, and women.

FINDINGS SPECIFIC TO IMPLEMENTATION CAPACITY

Nature of UNICEF contribution in relevant advocacy areas: in this case MHPSS (sole actor, primary actor, lead contributor, important contributor, seed sower, team contributor, over-the-line getter and/or key role player). Type of advocacy approaches considered.

In the context of MHPSS, UNICEF Italy considers three main approaches: service delivery, technical assistance and advocacy, and social and behaviour change (SBC). According to the Joint MHPSS Workplan, these approaches are carried out by the NatCom and ECARO. The former mainly focuses on advocacy and SBC, while ECARO focuses on technical assistance and service delivery. Some key activities are jointly done by the two entities.

When it comes to specific advocacy approaches, the following are the main ones considered:

Public advocacy: This is the main focus of the NatCom. By combating stigma and discrimination against those living with mental health conditions, the goal is to increase confidence in seeking help when necessary and recognizing situations where intervention is needed. As an organization, UNICEF emphasizes engaging young people in discussions about mental health to promote social participation and understanding.

Evidence generation: ECARO's intervention is founded on research-based evidence, incorporating relevant services identified through prior studies. Working with prominent and reputable actors, the intervention follows ESC guidelines, creating a structured road map for their MHPSS efforts. As they implement and gather field evidence, they also aim to strengthen their role as an MHPSS

convener, collaborating with local and national authorities. The NatCom recognizes the importance of data-driven advocacy actions in the field of mental health. The main focus is on providing technical assistance and using in-depth analysis to persuade governments to increase investments. The approach mentioned involves instituting advocacy measures such as strengthening laws, policies, budgets, and coordination mechanisms, which blurs the lines between advocacy and technical assistance.

MHPSS activities:

The ECARO technical assistance included training to teachers, educators, school leaders and other professionals in the education sector. They create or translate toolkits, graphics and videos from the international level into Italian, often collaborating with partners. The focus is on presenting key information clearly and ensuring readability.

The NatCom runs a programme aiming to create university courses on child rights and education by working with local subcommittees and volunteers. In 2022-2023, they have provided guidelines to these subcommittees to establish courses that cover the advocacy priorities of the NatCom, which are not necessarily the GAPS.

The Child Rights School (CRS) programme is currently undergoing revisions at both international and national levels. In the 2023-2024 school year, a new CRS process focusing on child rights education will be piloted, adhering to international guidelines. The NatCom staff members actively bring their expertise to international CRS discussions, promoting best practices and sharing experiences with individuals in Geneva and PFP.

The NatCom is also part of the Programming in High-Income Countries (PinHICs) programme focusing on high-income countries, which includes Italy, Spain, Slovenia, Japan and Germany. The aim is to explore possible actions in these nations concerning children's rights advocacy. By translating international guidelines into a national context, the programme seeks to consider national institutions, political situations, and cultural aspects of each society to create a greater impact. The example of the migrant crisis in Italy underscores the importance of inclusion as a pressing point on the country's political agenda.

Strongest with weakest areas of UNICEF Italy to do relevant advocacy work.

Opportunities: *At the global level, the integration of GAP3 was considered a success*, which was attributed to a strong foundation and excellent collaboration with country offices, NatComs, regions and programme group colleagues.

In this connection, NatCom representatives identified as a recent opportunity the coordination and joint strategy developed with ECARO, which is reflected in the Joint MHPSS Workplan developed. As an example of this, the collaboration with ECARO on a framework focusing on CRC and MHPSS was highlighted. They will work closely with school and university offices, advocacy members, and the network of schools and teachers. ECARO will handle the implementation of actions such as webinars and a follow-up survey. This will help monitor the effectiveness and usefulness of the framework.

Finally, it was identified that at the national level, staff are enthusiastic about training and capacity-building.

Challenges: *One of the main challenges identified by informants from the NatCom is the inherent limitations they face due to the nature of this type of offices.* In principle, NatComs cannot provide technical assistance, and that is considered a limitation by informants. Nonetheless, the organization will begin by providing training to teachers on MHPSS under their cooperation agreement with New York, which focuses on advocacy rather than technical assistance. By the end of the school year, they will share a survey with teachers in their database to understand their needs and desired discussion topics related to MHPSS. The survey will explore areas such as mental health, nutritional disorders, stress, and learning problems.

Another challenge identified is the misunderstanding regarding the importance of the NatCom advocacy at the national level. Many individuals perceive NatComs solely as fundraisers for UNICEF, neglecting their advocacy function. This issue is reinforced by some country office colleagues being unaware of the NatComs' advocacy activities. The recent webinar on advocacy evaluation exposed this lack of knowledge among various country office members who were surprised to learn about the NatComs' efforts in their respective countries. In addition, the informant mentioned the lack of common tools, which results in communication barriers within advocacy efforts on a national level. The informant also highlighted the lack of recognition for expertise in a certain context, mentioning that UNICEF staff are viewed as more technically proficient while NatCom staff are mainly perceived as mere volunteers with less training and primarily focused on advocacy.

Another challenge linked to the nature of NatComs is the challenging position of being both an NGO and representing a UN agency, particularly in a complex country like Italy. Balancing diplomacy with a focus on children's rights can be difficult, especially when dealing with a government that may not work on some of the issues addressed in UNICEF's mandate. This necessitates careful communication and advocacy strategies while maintaining a commitment to their mission.

The limited technical capacities of volunteers at local levels was also suggested as one of the main limitations of the NatCom, which on the other hand possesses a widespread presence across Italy, with numerous local committees that maintain strong ties to local authorities. This presents an opportunity to convey crucial advocacy messages at a local level.

The ECARO faces the challenges of not having the structure of a country office. For example, the office lacks communication channels at the national level. As a result, they rely on the channels of the NatCom for transmitting key advocacy messages on various topics, including MHPSS. However, this approach poses difficulties in SBC work because the NatComs audience does not necessarily include ECARO's target group.

Limited participation of UNICEF/CSOs in governmental MHPSS technical tables. There is currently no third sector participation or involvement of organizations like UNICEF in the Minister's technical table on mental health. In addition, the technical table does not currently have a specific focus on children and adolescents' mental health, which is problematic due to the increasing prevalence of mental health conditions among young people. A meeting involving the Minister of Health is to be held, with hopes that both ECARO and the NatCom will be able to push the agenda and secure a significant role in this endeavour. UNICEF is also planning to create an observatory to closely monitor the implementation of the National Plan of Action on Mental Health and the National Prevention Plan, focusing on various diseases, including mental health conditions.

At the global level, it was mentioned that different thematic areas compete with each other, leading to a lack of clarity regarding the organization's values and goals. Challenges were experienced in coordinating the GAP3 initiative, and mediation was required to reach agreement among various PG teams working on different aspects such as early childhood development, parenting, child protection, and adolescent development.

Finally, another challenge identified in advocacy involves maintaining a consistent course over a few years, as management tend to follow the latest trends. Ensuring focus and commitment can be difficult when senior staff become enthusiastic about new ideas for advocacy endeavours.

Level of definition of advocacy roles for the implementation of advocacy work on MHPSS.

Roles between NatCom and HQ

The NatCom maintains a cooperation agreement with UNICEF HQ in New York, which outlines their mandate for advocacy and fundraising efforts. Each year, they develop a joint strategic plan (JSP) encompassing strategies for fundraising, communication, and advocacy that spans over four years. This JSP is updated annually from September to December. The most recent JSP covers 2023–2026, with the details being more precise for 2023 and less specific for 2026.

According to a relevant informant from the NatCom, the perception is that the understanding of the roles and responsibilities between HQ, Programme Group (PG), PFP and NatCom has significantly improved. This progress is attributed to increased communication and regular exchanges, particularly in the area of MHPSS. With attention from HQ, MHPSS efforts have become well organized and structured. Furthermore, HQ has hired a dedicated individual from PG to provide technical support to NatComs, focusing on MHPSS technical aspects. In the PFP, there is a focal point dedicated to advocacy and strategies to accelerate outcomes, with one individual deeply involved in these efforts. Regular biweekly calls between the two focal points and all NatCom members have greatly aided in establishing common ground and enhancing the understanding of the operations of both systems. Another informant from the NatCom also mentioned that, in recent years, Italy has been actively involved in numerous pilot programmes, allowing them to closely collaborate with PFP and HQ. This has given them a clear understanding of global advocacy priorities, effective strategies for advocating these priorities, and the limitations of their actions.

Roles between NatCom and ECARO

At the country level, the clear definition of roles and responsibilities has been traditionally an issue, especially when it comes to the work of the NatCom and ECARO. Although the mandates of both entities are fairly clear, there have been many situations where the roles and responsibilities for advocacy needed to be clarified, mainly for the following reasons:

1. **Unclear definition of roles and responsibilities between ECARO and the NatCom** colleagues in the area of advocacy. Challenges arise in determining who takes the lead with certain authorities and distinguishing between technical assistance (ECARO's mandate) and advocacy initiatives (NatCom's mandate). The ongoing discussion has yet to reach a conclusive solution.
2. **Unclear distinction between ECARO and the NatCom in relation to the authorities.** Despite sharing the UNICEF logo, representatives from both entities considered it essential to communicate their individual roles and maintain a twofold approach with Italian authorities. This approach has been successful in some instances, for example the signing of an MoU between ECARO and the Ministry of Health. The internal agreement between the parties involves keeping the NatCom informed on the development of the MoU and all related areas identified with the Ministry, but the accountability remains with ECARO. Informants also pointed out the need for collaboration between the NatCom and ECARO due to their intersecting work, by refining the limits of their respective mandates and accountabilities to better define the scope of their activities. ECARO's presence in Italy adds value by providing data, evidence and protection concerns that can be shared regularly. The NatCom possesses a unique power, unrelated to evidence from interventions. They are currently discussing their participation in initial meetings on MHPSS, led by the Ministry of Health. From the beginning of operations, ECARO was presented as a new actor in the child protection system in Italy. Significant effort was spent on gaining approval from both national and local authorities in Italy, ensuring that both authorities and society understand the mandate of UNICEF and why it is necessary in a high-income country. This is still reported to be an issue when dealing with some governmental sectors.
3. **ECARO and the NatCom not working together to share similar messages and communicate consistently with national authorities,** which do not usually differentiate between the two. For the authorities and the public, they are the same organization. ECARO and the NatComs have established joint advocacy practices, with the heads of office from both the NatCom and UNICEF engaging in high-level meetings with officials, emphasizing their unified identity

and goal under the UNICEF umbrella. However, ECARO is handling the technical aspects of the work and relevant meetings with the government are not to be joined by NatComs. Nonetheless, the offices have established a coordination mechanism that allows for regular updates to ensure that both technical progress and advocacy efforts maintain cohesion at political and policy levels.

4. **Finding a common evidence-based position in advocacy work.** ECARO's advocacy actions rely on evidence generated through direct intervention and implementation, while the NatCom's advocacy is primarily based on analysing compliance with the legal framework and policy in the child rights environment. The difficulty lies in combining these two distinct approaches and perspectives for a unified outcome. ECARO's primary mission is to deliver services, generate policy change, and offer technical support to the government. Despite facing challenges in the current Italian institutional climate, they must maintain neutrality and impartiality as a UN agency. On the contrary, NatComs are CSOs and can be very vocal in certain areas and situations. The key issue is to balance a specific mandate with that of a civil society organization. Although they are both part of the UN family, their mandates differ from and influence relationships with counterparts and institutions, which poses a challenge.

On the one hand, ECARO representatives emphasize the importance of accountability in service delivery, highlighting the need for mechanisms to ensure quality. The concern arises from the observation that the NatCom lacks both mandate and structure for quality assurance. This issue was brought to light when they financed a hospital in Rome for children's psychological support, and questions were raised about whether the services provided meet UNICEF standards. ECARO acknowledges the importance of collaboration with the NatCom in public campaigns for social behaviour change. They see this as a significant opportunity to work together and demonstrate successful cooperation.

On the other hand, and despite being asked not to provide technical assistance, the NatCom finds it necessary to take part in institutional dialogues and be present at decision-making tables to be effective. They acknowledge that merely contributing social media content is not sufficient; offering technical content is crucial for influencing change. This situation calls for regular adjustments and alignment with UNICEF ECARO in Italy. For example, the NatCom is allowed to work in schools to promote the whole concept of child rights and talk about the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, there is a boundary regarding programmes with technical content on MHPSS.

Nonetheless, informants noted that a more unified approach in the form of a joint workplan is expected to lead to improvements in several of the aforementioned issues. ECARO and the NatCom now have a clear understanding of their areas of accountability for MHPSS interventions, which are now mainstream in all child rights efforts. Sometimes they approach authorities together, and sometimes separately, to address these concerns. Although at the technical level both offices follow different paths, both parties regularly consult with one another on various matters, such as assistance policy positions and public notifications, to maintain a coherent, unified approach within the organization. Furthermore, this one-UNICEF approach ensures effective communication and avoids confusion among their audience.

This represents a significant opportunity for UNICEF to combine the strengths, capacities and reach of both offices. However, this requires constant alignment and coordination. The issue of the NatCom providing technical assistance remains a subject of discussion. A clear direction from the headquarters is considered crucial by some informants, to help navigate this complex situation effectively.

Roles between NatCom and subnational committees. One informant from the NatCom emphasized the need to clarify the roles of local committees in the area of MHPSS and give them the necessary resources to function effectively. The importance of establishing a basic floor and defining non-negotiable terms and priorities for these committees to follow was also mentioned. The committees have immense potential due to their local presence, daily interactions with authorities, and work in promoting children's rights. The informant urges for better use of their capacity by enhancing their structure, organization and content.

Level of coordination of your unit/division/office with other UNICEF units/divisions/offices for advocacy work within GAP3 (probing for regional and HQ levels).

The NatCom developed a joint strategic plan and, for the first time in 2022, a joint engagement plan that involves all entities working in Italy. Therefore, there is now a joint engagement plan with the NatCom, the HQ, the Innocenti Centre and the ECARO team. The following are the key coordination areas and approaches identified during the course of the case study:

Coordination with HQ

HQ New York supports through GCA and GAP3 representatives, as well as PG representatives. GCA interact with NatComs in three main ways: championing country capacity-building, developing and promoting advocacy toolkits, and organizing and attending regular meetings with NatComs for bilateral relations.

PG support in HQ is the main link between UNICEF's PFP and the NatComs. They facilitated biweekly calls with the PFP to share opportunities and information related to mental health partnerships. The main role has been to provide a platform for connecting colleagues and ensuring discussions are focused on relevant opportunities while verifying compliance with established criteria. PG supports on a more technical note on MHPSS, supporting the mental health agenda more broadly. Resources have been shared through the biweekly calls with the NatComs. The MHPSS expert role does not necessarily involve assisting with implementation, but rather ensuring that NatComs can navigate various resources effectively. Efforts have been made to address knowledge gaps and keep everyone informed by holding meetings. HQ has emphasized that sharing best practices and information between NatComs is essential. Seeing successful strategies implemented by others, such as the case in Spain, inspires teams to develop their own strategies during brainstorming sessions.

The HQ team, including the Advocacy and Policy Specialist, meets weekly to discuss their collaboration internally with NatComs, and meets biweekly with national committees for updates on their work.

The Geneva HQ, through PFP, is the direct contact point for NatComs for developing and managing the joint strategic plans and all relevant activities. Informants praised the effectiveness of the coordination with PFP due to biweekly calls attended by the parties. These calls are managed by a focal point in PFP dedicated to MHPSS. Information is also received from UNICEF's EU relations focal point, emphasizing the importance of NatComs' role in advocacy and influencing EU decisions.

In October 2022, a meeting was held in Rome with 19 NatComs from high-income contexts to discuss mental health initiatives. Attendees shared their ongoing work, identified challenges, and explored areas where the headquarters could provide technical assistance, guidance and resources. This gathering led to the creation of a new role to support on technical aspects. The meeting's discussions also contributed to the development of an EU-specific mental health strategy aligned with the region's growing interest in the topic. The HQ representative arranged speakers from United for Global Mental Health to discuss global mental health advocacy trends and opportunities. This complements the role of MHPSS experts from PG, who provided more technical support in designing strategies. During the session, participants identified the need for more frequent meetings to discuss GAP3. They now organize monthly calls to share resources, in which ECARO also participates.

The group plans to hold another in-person meeting in January 2024. Until then, they will conduct biweekly remote sessions discussing various aspects of mental health within different UNICEF offices, such as the Office of Research (Innocenti) and Office of Innovation in Sweden. Participants share their mental health strategies, best practices, challenges and implementation examples during these sessions. GAP3 colleagues also host global advocacy think tank sessions and expert-led meetings focused on mental health, facilitating knowledge-sharing as per the National Committees' request.

Informants from the NatCom appreciate the support from HQ (NY, Geneva and Brussels), holding frequent meetings focused on various priorities. Recently, they conducted a workshop on priority-setting, monitoring, evaluation and communication. The team actively exchanges ideas, shares best practices and collaborates on communication efforts and campaigns. Furthermore, monthly coordination meetings are held between the Italian branch and headquarters to stay updated on each other's situations.

Coordination with the Regional Office

Informants from both parties have highlighted the collaboration between ECARO and the NatCom, emphasizing the improvement in recent years in terms of developing coordination mechanisms for information sharing, with biweekly participation in meetings attended by various communication, fundraising and advocacy teams. Before that, ECARO and the NatCom recognized that their joint planning efforts were insufficient and agreed to hold additional bilateral meetings between heads of offices for strategic discussions. They aim to maintain open communication channels and transparency in their work. As already mentioned, both parties conducted a joint workplan exercise on MHPSS during the first quarter of 2023 to clarify roles and responsibilities, as it is an advocacy priority for NatCom and a global priority for UNICEF, as well as a programme priority for both organizations. They acknowledged differences in defining advocacy versus service delivery within their collaboration. The representatives from the different offices have also identified the institutional organizations that serve as counterparts for these diverse joint initiatives. For example, in a recent meeting, the focus was on effective communication with the institutional donor, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Italy. A mapping exercise identified institutional counterparts and their respective roles, ensuring a unified UNICEF approach to prevent overlap and protect the organization's reputation.

Some issues regarding information-sharing were raised, as ECARO has not yet shared with the NatCom their workplans with the Minister of Health. This is unusual, as workplans are typically not considered confidential. Despite a workshop held in 2023, they have not provided their workplan for joint implementation. ECARO's work pressure and its lack of a country coordinator is acknowledged; however, it raises concerns about their enthusiasm and goodwill for collaboration.

The NatCom and ECARO are invited to coordination meetings with headquarters. Despite its critical role in activities in Italy, the participation of ECARO has been reported as not continuous.

Examples of coordination: The Child Guarantee is a European Commission programme focused on combating child poverty and identifying vulnerable groups exposed to poverty and social exclusion. Italy was chosen as a pilot country to test intervention models and assess the effectiveness of policies in reducing child poverty. The initiative was led by ECARO through a legal agreement with the European Commission, and coordination mechanisms were established in Italy alongside the NatCom. A steering committee, comprising both ECARO and the NatCom representatives, was formed to guide the process with national authorities. While ECARO takes the lead, the NatCom uses its position to connect with civil society and promote the programme through various working groups. Among the vulnerable groups addressed by this initiative are children with mental health issues, identified through research conducted in Italy and recommendations from the European Commission. The cooperation between the NatCom and ECARO is considered by the informant to be an example of effective collaboration.

ECARO also provided technical support to the NatCom to establish U-Report Italy, a platform for engaging young people in discussing crucial issues in their lives and amplifying their voices in advocacy efforts. A preliminary survey was conducted to explore the potential of this tool. Although not highly technical, it proved useful in consolidating the views of young people in a clear and readable manner. This led to the creation of U-Report 'On the Move', specifically designed for migrant children and children with a migration background. In future plans, U-Report Italy and U-Report 'On the Move' will merge, creating a unified platform for Italian children, migrants and refugees that addresses their diverse needs. The European Union has issued a recommendation on the Child Guarantee, emphasizing the need to focus on the most vulnerable

children at risk of social exclusion. UNICEF ECARO played a crucial role in implementing these recommendations in Italy, Spain and other countries.

Finally, ECARO does not use social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or LinkedIn, and uses the NatCom as a platform for better integration and collaboration. They prioritize working together and maintaining high brand awareness.

Coordination with subnational committees: One informant from the NatCom highlighted that there was an opportunity to collaborate more closely with local committees in Italy, considering the diverse range of volunteers, who vary in activity levels and technical competencies. The main challenge lies in levelling up local branches by providing proper tools, guidance and content. According to the informant, a minimum standard must be established across all areas, not just mental health.

Coordination with other national actors: The Italy NatCom advocacy team regularly engages in dialogue with the school and health teams, as well as those responsible for climate change and volunteer teams.

Internal coordination: Informants reported a continuous exchange between the school team and the health team within the NatCom advocacy team. Another informant from the NatCom confirmed that the advocacy team works closely with the communication teams, as they play a crucial role in conveying messages to the public.

Finally, an informant from the NatCom highlighted that collaboration within UNICEF can be challenging due to limited awareness of the capacities of the National Committee, which handles not only fundraising but also advocacy and programmes. Certain parts of UNICEF that are not directly involved in advocacy may lack knowledge about the NatComs work.

Extent to which clear guidelines from HQ or at the RO/CO level are available to develop networks for advocacy purposes, and how these were applied in the case of MHPSS and towards improving childcare, pre-primary and school capacity to promote and protect the MHPSS needs of infants, children and adolescents.

UNICEF is strongly recognized in Italy and known for working towards children's rights, guarantee of good work and a strong media presence. **No specific strategies for developing networks were identified, and the process of expanding the network seems to be rather organic**, mainly based on previous experiences/recommendations and the mapping exercises conducted by the NatCom. UNICEF is invited to many different forums discussing children's rights, which represent good opportunities to expand the network for advocacy purposes. The NatCom identifies organizations already working in relevant areas and analyses how they accelerate specific aspects of UNICEF's work.

The NatCom actively engages in various NGO networks, including the Educazione network, which focuses on learning environments for children aged 0–6 years in Italy. There is a noticeable difference between the northern and southern parts of the country regarding childcare and education practices. Through its projects and data, the NatCom works within this network to support the idea that the ministry should invest equally across all regions of Italy to develop appropriate learning environments for young children.

The NatCom also participates in writing the integrated national guidelines for the 0–6 education system, emphasizing a multidisciplinary approach combining pedagogy, games and activities. These guidelines contribute to government discussions on educational issues and are shared with spokespersons for advocacy during national and international events. In Italy, the 0–6 education system falls under regional competence rather than national competence.

The NatCom was also involved in the discussion on the national guidelines for including foreign students in the Italian school system. Previously, there was an observatory on interculturality, which included the National Committee. However, the new government has not resumed this effort. Despite this, UNICEF Italy and its advocacy colleagues maintain a strong presence within the NGO network, promoting their cause.

The CRC group is a voluntary initiative focused on reporting and monitoring the situation of children's rights in Italy, involving over 100 associations. They produce an annual independent report on the application of the CRC in Italy, and in 2022 the NatCom contributed by writing a report on the mental health situation as well. The NatCom plays a significant role in the project and is involved in almost all thematic areas such as mental health, participation, non-discrimination and education with learning environments. The goal is to create an alternative perspective about the national situation and receive an evaluation from the United Nations Committee on Children's Rights, thus advocating for children's rights.

In addition, the NatCom is gathering a community of practice for MHPSS that includes relevant actors working to provide services for migrants and refugees. Through consultation, evidence is generated and shared with authorities to promote policy change. A dedicated coalition will create specific policy papers for advocacy action.

Adequacy of resources for advocacy work.

The NatCom resources available for MHPSS are limited to the Gemelli partnership for MHPSS. The office aims to involve the private sector in fundraising efforts for MHPSS, but no concrete steps have yet been taken.

One informant at the global level highlighted the scarcity of resources available for advocacy work. In any given country, 95 per cent of time and effort is spent on programme discussions and analysing results-based management (RBM) and human rights strategies. Only 5 per cent is dedicated to advocacy, leading to a lack of intentional thinking and professional advocates in organizations. Additionally, there is no designated P4 lead for mental health advocacy under GAP3, with only a partial staff position and occasional support from others.

One informant at the global level also highlighted the challenges faced by various NatComs in prioritizing mental health initiatives, specifically mentioning smaller teams such as in Slovakia and Poland. The process of strategizing often takes time and resources, which is difficult amid competing interests. Not all NatComs have staff solely focused on mental health. Instead, advocacy focal points often address multiple issues, such as climate, migration and others. The expertise of the people involved in these conversations primarily lies in advocacy. Their knowledge facilitates discussions on mental health since it aligns with UNICEF's focus on other areas such as climate and migration. Therefore, the text emphasizes the existing advocacy expertise within the organization.

However, the aforementioned feedback does not necessarily apply in the context of the Italian NatCom, for which dedicated MHPSS is available and supporting staff are also contributing to pushing the MHPSS agenda.

FINDINGS SPECIFIC TO SYSTEM ADEQUACY

Extent to which clear procedures for planning, monitoring and reporting are established.

When it comes to planning, the limitations and challenges of a NatCom compared to a CO were mentioned. Any given CO develops a ToC, together with the strategy notes, the results framework and clear workplans. The CO develops workplans with governments and then teams have individual workplans because the level of accountability is very high and workplans are used by the managers to monitor progress, which encompasses all that the different sections and units do. The situation in the NatCom is different. One informant from the NatCom mentioned that colleagues may be accustomed to their established ways of working, relying on their contacts, knowledge and institutional memory. However, from an outsider's perspective, it might appear that there is a lack of robust planning, which poses challenges in terms of accountability. While joint engagement plans and a joint strategic plan exist, individual workplans are absent. This absence is considered to pose a challenge as everyone should have a clearly defined workplan, approved by the team leader, to ensure clarity and maximize the team's human resources. Given the team's small size and limited financial resources, this becomes even more crucial.

When it comes to monitoring and reporting, informants from both the NatCom and ECARO stressed the need for periodic strategic reflection and support. At ECARO, internal discussion revolves around finding a solution for assessing improvement in the MEAL approach, which includes monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning. The chief of office is expected to guide this process, and the upcoming arrival of a new coordinator could contribute to this strategic reasoning. From a technical standpoint, there is a clear understanding of the necessary improvements; however, strategic reflection and guidance are required for further progress. At the NatCom, the effectiveness of the monitoring function is influenced by factors such as management, director preferences and working style. While the NatCom's autonomy from UNICEF is advantageous, they require assistance from HQ in establishing structures and processes to foster a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) culture. A recent workshop on M&E and advocacy showed progress, but a lack of ownership among team members was reported. Their reliance on more experienced colleagues at HQ to create a ToC indicates that without ownership, the ToC risks being set aside.

Adequacy of the M&E system in place for advocacy work.

The following are the **main opportunities** identified for M&E work:

New tools and approaches introduced. Informants from the NatCom highlighted the recent improvements in the M&E approach for advocacy, which now uses the theory of change to prepare annual activities with a focus on monitoring indicators and with the goal of establishing directions for the MHPSS until 2026 and creating a results framework (currently in a draft version). This positive development has also led to the introduction of a new instrument: the contribution stories. These stories provide qualitative information about the NatCom's ongoing advocacy activities, allowing audiences to better understand accomplishments and future steps, while emphasizing the importance of evaluating case advocacy activities both quantitatively and qualitatively. Caution is advised by informants, as discussing numbers is easier for fundraising and communication indicators compared to advocacy indicators. One informant from the NatCom emphasized the importance of sharing assumptions from the beginning when evaluating advocacy indicators.

Measuring processes: One informant from the NatCom mentioned that in Italy, the distinction between process indicators and resource indicators is crucial. While NatComs manages process indicators, it is important to acknowledge that resource indicators on the advocacy side involve other stakeholders. The informant also emphasized the significance of monitoring the relationship between actions, changes and outcomes to gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation. The informant recommended counting factors such as meetings, documents and hearings, and providing examples to NatComs for better understanding. Concerns arise regarding the potential loss of crucial information surrounding ongoing work due to insufficient details in the framework's process indicators: "It is important to keep track of what happens between what we do and those changes and the results to make sure that we understand the whole picture."

Use of overarching strategies/directions. One informant from the NatCom mentioned the focus on working with M&E overarching strategies to achieve results by using UNICEF guidance provided by PFP. The guidance is updated every few years, and the latest version is highly regarded due to its use of seven steps for measuring policy change. This approach recognizes the importance of intermediate steps towards policy change, rather than focusing solely on the end result.

Beyond the aforementioned limitations when it comes to planning, the following are the **main challenges** identified for M&E work:

Challenges measuring contribution. One informant from ECARO stressed that measuring advocacy efforts presents a significant challenge, as there is not yet a well-established practice for tracking progress. Improvements must be made by both the ECARO and NatCom. UNICEF has internal tools for monitoring policy changes produced by their advocacy efforts, but these tools differ from those used by NatCom. Overall, the issue lies in coordinating and streamlining evaluation methods for advocacy initiatives. The informant emphasizes that there is room for collaboration in finding a joint mechanism and tools to monitor advocacy efforts.

Limited M&E staff. In the CO setting, having strong M&E tools and approaches is essential, with dedicated M&E teams in place. However, the National Committee lacks a single M&E officer, resulting in unfamiliarity with key concepts like outcome, output, activity, input indicators and targets. This absence of an M&E background poses challenges and influences the way the NatCom works.



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