

EVALUATION BRIEF

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Baseline Assessment of Environmental and Social Safeguards (ESS) Implementation in UNICEF



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In line with the United Nations' overarching effort to standardize safeguard policies and streamline the reporting of environmental and social performance metrics across its various entities, UNICEF has embraced the integration of environmental and social safeguards (ESS) as a fundamental organizational commitment within its Strategic Plan for 2022-2025. UNICEF is diligently progressing towards the anticipated official launch of its ESS system by the end of 2023.

To facilitate the rollout of the ESS system throughout the organization, the UNICEF Evaluation Office, in close partnership with the Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring (DAPM) and the Programme Group (PG), commissioned a Baseline Assessment of Environmental and Social Safeguards (ESS) implementation in UNICEF, which was conducted from December 2022 to August 2023, with the support of an external consultant.

This assessment aimed to determine the degree of the implementation of the ESS procedures across UNICEF; identify the challenges and benefits associated with the implementation; and provide evidence and recommendations on the areas of support needed for further scale-up of the UNICEF ESS procedures. The assessment intends to provide a snapshot against which implementation will be measured in the future, both through monitoring systems and future evaluations.

The main driving assessment questions were:

“ **To what extent and how has UNICEF implemented the ESS procedures?**

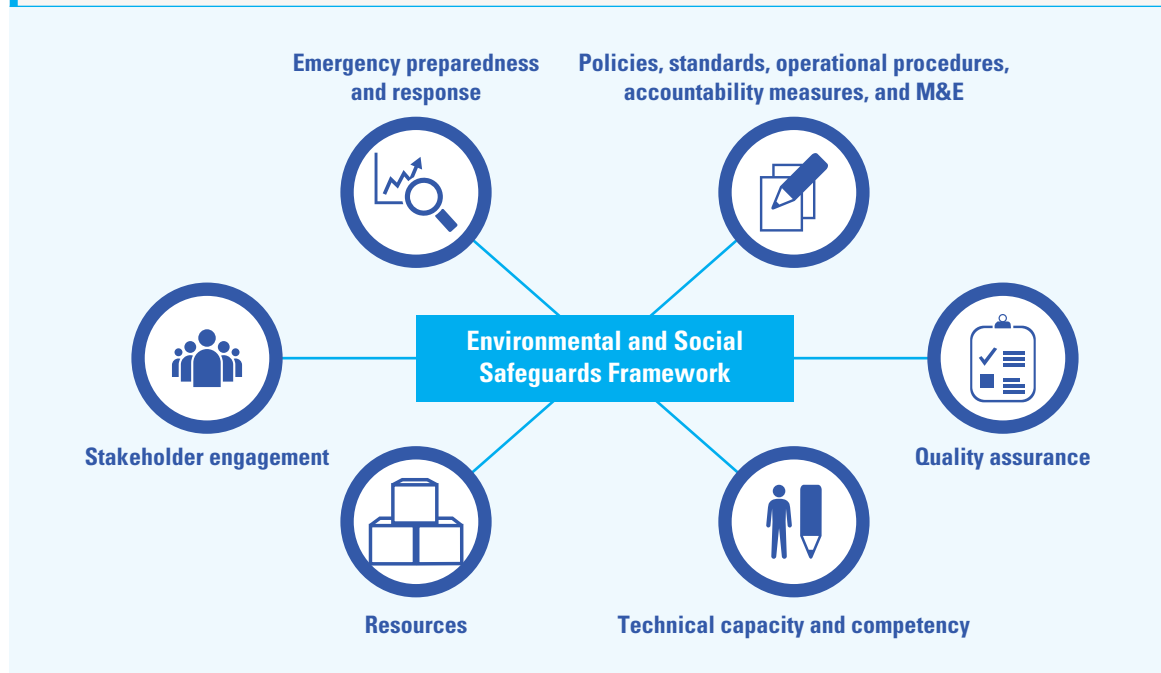
What are the lessons learned, needs, and main enabling and hindering factors to ensure effective ESS implementation and scale up ESS across the organization?

Where do differences lie between UNICEF's draft ESS system and the safeguard requirements of relevant partners?

Data collection methods and analysis

The assessment used a mixed method approach, applied triangulation, and was utilization-focused, theory-guided, and participatory. It integrated gender, human rights, disability and equity considerations. The assessment utilized the 'Fully Functioning ESS System' framework as an overarching approach, which is comprised of the following six key elements:

Figure 1: Necessary Elements of a Functioning ESS System



Source: Baseline Assessment, Assessment Consultant

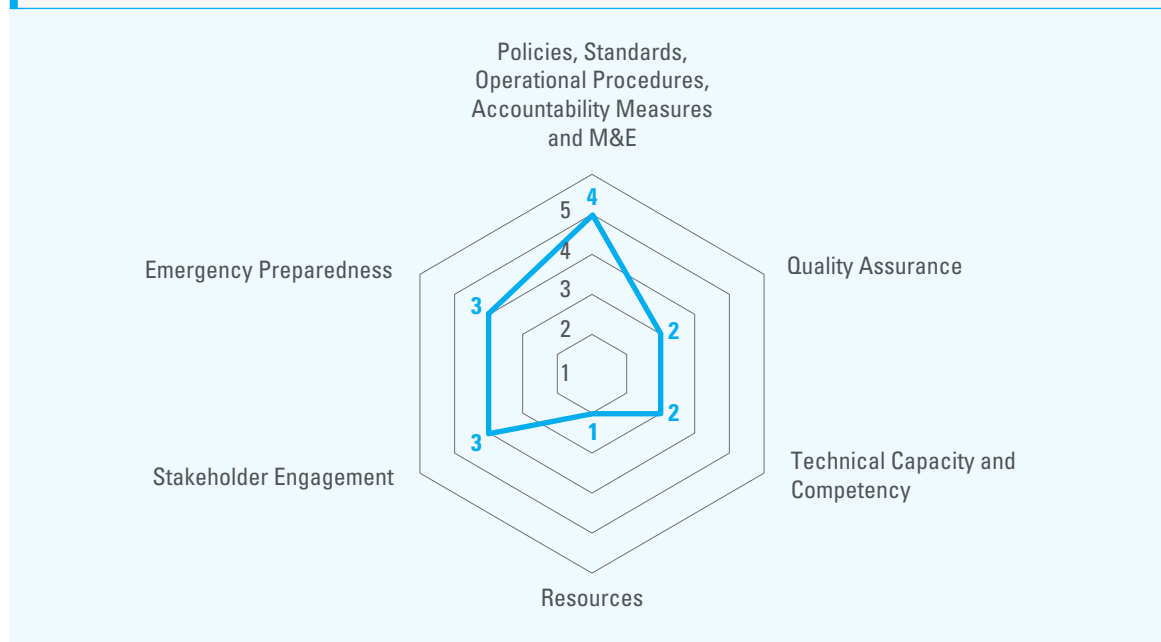
As part of the methodology, approximately 100 internal and external documents, including primary and secondary data sources and a literature review, informed the analysis. Sixty-seven key internal and external informants were interviewed across all levels of the organization and beyond through key informant interviews and focus group discussions. An online survey targeted at regional offices (100 per cent response rate) and country offices (64 per cent response rate, or 83 out of 129) enriched the analysis.

The assessment also undertook a benchmarking process to compare UNICEF's draft ESS system against those in place in eight UN agencies [UN Women, World Health Organization (WHO), World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)], five of UNICEF's prominent donors [World Bank, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), KfW Development Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and European Commission - Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO)], and the Green Climate Fund (GCF).

Conclusions

UNICEF is partially positioned to roll out its own ESS system. Attention must be paid to all six elements of the ESS framework, especially to Quality Assurance, Technical Capacity and Competency, and Resources.

Figure 2: Overview of UNICEF's scores for each assessment element



Source: Baseline Assessment, triangulation of all data collection tools

Most ESS implementation experience exists in Country Offices (COs), where donor support facilitated the implementation of ESS and the development of ESS capacity. Country Offices should become the primary drivers of ESS implementation when the UNICEF ESS system is in place and fully rolled out.

There is uncertainty about where ESS 'action points' lie in the UNICEF programme cycle. When the UNICEF ESS system is rolled out, the first step involves applying a screening checklist to determine risk levels. This can be done at the Country Programme Document (CPD) level, during annual planning, or when on-the-ground projects are being designed within a country's programme. Defining roles and responsibilities at each action point will be crucial once the UNICEF ESS system is operational.

Awareness of ESS issues varies widely among employees, and there are some challenges distinguishing between general 'greening/sustainability' initiatives and the risk-focused ESS system. As the ESS system extends to Country Programme Documents (CPDs) and annual work plans, programme teams must increase their awareness of ESS requirements. Senior management is aware of ESS issues, which bodes well for formal approval and implementation support.

Technical support is vital for efficient ESS implementation, with ESS focal points in Regional Offices and Country Offices serving as crucial sources of support. Providing guidance materials for screening and interpreting environmental and social standard requirements also is essential.

Decisions should be made on the relationship between existing social safeguard policies and the new ESS system. While most UN agencies and donor partners subsume social policies under a broader ESS 'umbrella,' UNICEF's well-established social policies exist outside the draft ESS system.

The benchmarking work reveals that UNICEF broadly aligns with the safeguard requirements of key donors and other UN agencies in its draft ESS system. To operationalize ESS effectively, UNICEF needs to enhance capacity in all six areas of the assessment framework, including monitoring and operational procedures and exclusion and exemption criteria.

Recommendations



Recommendation 1

Make ESS an organizational priority.

Given its relative lack of experience with environmental and social safeguards work, management needs to prioritize ESS, with the dedication to conduct capacity building on ESS across the whole organization. ESS is a new area of focus for UNICEF and will require the eventual recruitment of qualified experts.



Recommendation 2

Enhance employee awareness on ESS.

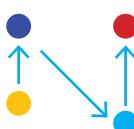
A prerequisite for effective implementation of an ESS system is employee awareness of the purpose of ESS and specific roles and responsibilities related to it. A targeted communication strategy should be developed to promote ESS awareness at different organizational levels. Such a plan is included in the current draft ESS rollout plan and should be implemented effectively.



Recommendation 3

Put in place necessary pre-conditions before rollout.

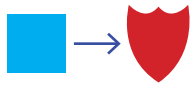
For UNICEF to be well positioned to roll out the ESS system, it should implement a rollout plan, which should be informed by the necessary pre-conditions.



Recommendation 4

Specify ESS action points in the programme cycle.

The UNICEF ESS system rollout plan (currently under development) should specify exactly where ESS actions need to occur in developing CPDs, programmes, and projects. An initial scan should be undertaken while developing a CPD to determine overall environmental and social risk. This scan should be conducted by relevant programme teams. Focused screening for environmental and social risk should occur when annual work plans are determined, and this should be the combined responsibility of programme teams, ROs, and COs. Screening and risk categorization should occur during the early stages of on-the-ground programme development.



Recommendation 5

Clarify the relationship between the draft UNICEF ESS system and the draft Safeguarding Policy.

The relationship between the draft UNICEF Safeguarding Policy and the draft UNICEF ESS system needs to be clarified. The draft Safeguarding Policy addresses *individual* forms of harm while recognizing that collective, broader and longer-term environmental and social safeguards also must be considered as part of UNICEF's work. There appear to be three options for clarifying this relationship. First, the two remain entirely separate. Second, the Safeguarding Policy is subsumed within the ESS system, given that the latter can cover both risks to individuals, the environment and communities. Third, UNICEF could consider subsuming both within a more general 'risk assessment/management' umbrella, presenting a holistic approach and avoiding a proliferation of issue-specific focal points.



Recommendation 6

Redefine the Core Standard Indicator (CSI).

The CSI indicator should be redefined better to record a CO's environmental and social safeguard performance. It could be restated as follows: *The Country Office applied the UNICEF Environmental and Social Safeguards procedure to its annual work plan and specific programmes/projects. The programme/project is considered to be of [X] risk. Of the programmes/projects initiated this year, [Y] were high risk, [Z] were moderate risk, and [A] were low risk.*



Recommendation 7

Conduct future evaluations of the UNICEF ESS system.

The assessment framework developed to guide this baseline assessment has provided an adequate basis for future evaluations of the UNICEF ESS system. To capture progress from the official rollout, it is recommended that the ESS system be evaluated after the rollout and at the end of the existing Strategic Plan.



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