

EVIDENCE OF UNICEF ACHIEVEMENTS FOR CHILDREN: A META-SYNTHESIS OF UNICEF EVALUATIONS

INITIAL EVIDENCE-BASED SUMMARY NOTE ON 17 GLOBAL CORPORATE EVALUATIONS COVERING 61 CASE STUDY COUNTRIES

Global Leadership Meeting, March 2023



**Evidence of UNICEF
achievements for children:
a meta-synthesis of
UNICEF evaluations**

unicef 
for every child

BRIEFING PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND USE

This initial evidence-based summary note aims to provide UNICEF with a synthesis of its main achievements and areas to improve based on evaluation reports. The objectives were to synthesize an initial selection of UNICEF evaluations conducted between 2018 and 2022 to provide a limited but rapid evidence-based summary to address the following specific questions:

- Where did UNICEF perform well?
- Where was UNICEF's performance mixed, and, where possible, what were the reasons for this?
- What are the key factors that have enabled or hindered UNICEF's achievements?
- What lessons can be learned?

The answers to these questions will be a preliminary guide to inform the UNICEF Global Leadership meeting (March 13-15, 2023), reflect on how UNICEF can continue to deliver efficiently and effectively for children in an ever-changing world, and ultimately reinforce its vision for children as the world approaches the mid-point towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

The summary note, commissioned by the Evaluation Office, has been produced in partnership with Newcastle University (NIHR, Innovation Observatory).

METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

The findings of this initial meta-synthesis are drawn from 17 Global Evaluation Reports (see Appendix 1). These reports cover the five Goal Areas in the Strategic Plan (both 2018-2021 and 2022-2025) and analyzed topics ranging from UNICEF's contributions to health systems strengthening to inclusive education for children with disabilities; and from drinking water supply programmes to supporting children in urban settings. The reports cover around 61 case study countries (see Appendix 2) from all UNICEF programming regions. Each region was represented by at least one country: East Asia and Pacific; Eastern Europe and Central Asia; Western Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean; Middle East and North Africa; South Asia; Sub-Saharan Africa; Eastern and Southern Africa; West and Central Africa. The reports included several typologies of countries (from low to upper-middle-income countries) and were produced between 2018 to 2022 (covering programmes implemented since 2008).

The 17 Global Evaluation Reports were read in detail to extract evidence on good performance by UNICEF, mixed performance or goals not achieved, enablers and barriers. The findings were then synthesized into overall positive areas and areas where UNICEF could improve. Finally, initial recommendations were drawn.

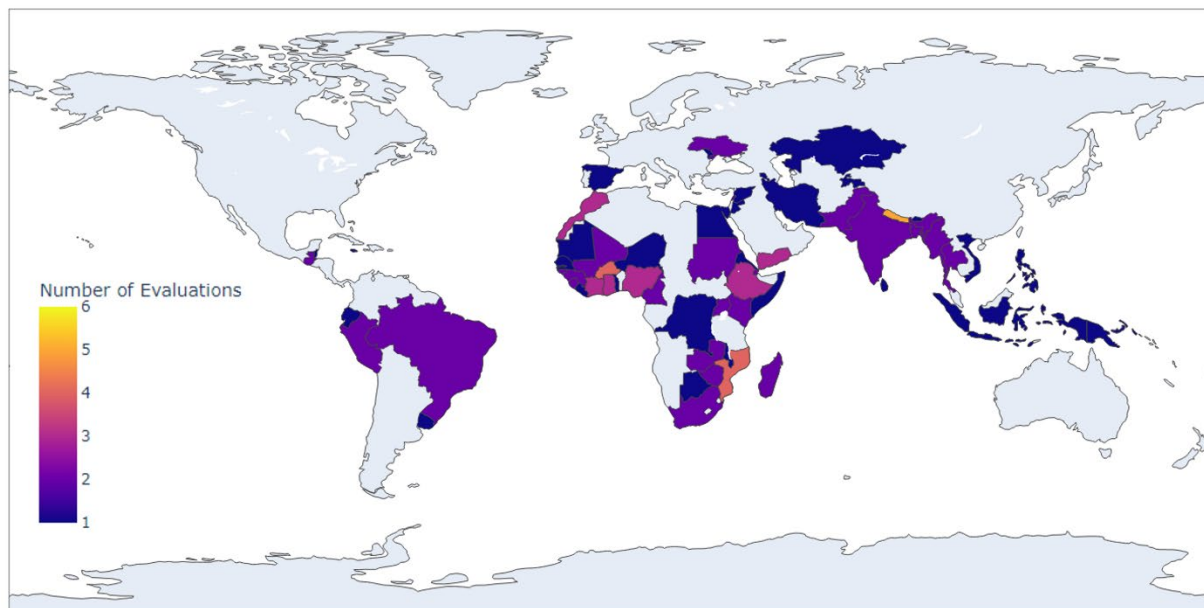


Figure 1. Case studies countries included the evaluations for the summary note. The colour represents the number of case studies in that country.

FINDINGS

1. Areas where UNICEF performed well

- 1.1. **Leadership:** UNICEF is well-regarded and trusted, with considerable influence at all levels. UNICEF has a strong leadership role in inclusive education by convening national and international experts, and giving a voice to smaller NGOs.
- 1.2. **Policy development and alignment:** UNICEF's support often improved policy development, coherence and sensitization, as well as horizontal and vertical coordination. It aligns itself with national plans, priorities, activities and investments to strengthen health systems and put policy into practice. For example, UNICEF's goal of universal access to education aligned with the majority of national authorities. This ability to align with government policies strengthens UNICEF's relationship with national authorities.
- 1.3. **Service delivery:** UNICEF supports system strengthening through direct service delivery, supporting early childhood education and early learning programmes. This has contributed, for example, to an increase in the pre-primary enrollment rate from 33% in 2000 to 61% in 2020. Other examples include UNICEF accelerating change to end child marriage and female genital mutilation; and strengthening child protection systems to prevent and respond to violence, exploitation or abuse against children. It also implemented flexible interventions to increase access, e.g., reducing or abolishing school fees.
- 1.4. **Relevance of programmes:** UNICEF has a track record of ensuring that programmes are relevant to the needs of vulnerable populations, communities, families and children through Situation Analysis and its programme planning and design processes.

- 1.5. **Capacity development:** In several instances, UNICEF has developed the technical skills of social service providers. For example, in the health sector, care providers benefitted from providing advice, training and support materials. Investment in training has improved the capacities of staff, partners, communities, families and children in several country contexts.
- 1.6. **Information management systems:** UNICEF has contributed to improving information management systems. For instance, in the health sector, UNICEF made efforts to strengthen surveillance, which has improved the assessment of the effect of health systems on child-wellbeing. This has, for example, allowed UNICEF to identify that while maternal deaths have decreased from 2000-2017, hundreds of women are still dying daily from complications in pregnancy and childbirth.
- 1.7. **Community partnership:** UNICEF's consultative planning, including community engagement and mobilization, prevents overlap and duplication. In working closely with local communities, UNICEF addressed harmful social beliefs and improved trust between, for instance, health centres and communities.
- 1.8. **Advocacy and convening:** UNICEF successfully advocated for universal access to education and facilitated a shift towards governments making inclusive education a higher priority at the priority setting, policy and programme planning levels. It has also advocated for the expansion of birth registrations, civil registration and vital statistics, which has resulted in an increase in the number of children under five being registered from 60 per cent in 2000 to 75 per cent today. UNICEF's convening and influencing role was notable in the countries with the strongest advocacy approaches.

2. Areas where UNICEF performance was mixed

- 2.1. **Coordination and establishment of partnerships:** UNICEF provides a leading role in coordination and establishes relevant, strategic partnerships with governments, global organizations and research institutions. However, it must engage further with international financial institutions (IFIs) and NGOs and improve links between ministries responsible for social protection, especially at sub-national levels. Similarly, goals on inter-agency coordination (both in development and humanitarian action) have only been partially met, and duplication and management costs could be reduced with periodic reviews. The private sector is an important partner, but UNICEF's engagement with them is low, possibly because these were largely for visible investments in (e.g.,) schools. Although collaboration with UN sister agencies has increased, this could improve at the country level with better defined roles and responsibilities.
- 2.2. **Localization of policies and programmes:** At the national level, UNICEF supported governments to generate evidence to inform policy, for instance, regarding out-of-school children. However, there was a lack of evidence at the sub-national authority level and, consequently, a lack of time and resources devoted to inclusive education strategies. Additionally, planned programmes did not always translate into implementation.
- 2.3. **Having concrete and realistic implementation plans:** Although UNICEF supports policy development and coherence, these policies must be more concrete and realistic with

better implementation plans. UNICEF's support to governments is inconsistent and requires more enforceable implementation plans and/or legal frameworks. Social protection policies are not sufficiently supported by legislation and/or fully enforced.

- 2.4. **Replication and scaling up of interventions:** Findings were mixed on the replication of global models (for example, for health systems strengthening) and scaling interventions that have proven effective at the country level. UNICEF had scaled ahead of gathering more robust, evidence-based results. This can mean that scaling occurs before important operational learning becomes available, which can undermine its effectiveness. Although UNICEF sometimes advocated for a more financial commitment from governments and implemented programmes that promoted low-cost technology, the upscaling was uneven. Similarly, there were promising signs of interventions to increase education access, such as increasing capacity development, providing training and leveraging funding. However, these tended to be effective in localised regions and lacked both resources and the political will to be sustainable.
- 2.5. **Proof of concept for community outreach programmes:** Country offices have significantly expanded community outreach programmes, which has mostly yielded positive results. However, there was insufficient evidence generated on the most effective interventions, meaning there is a significant risk that pilot programmes will be scaled up without sufficient proof of efficacy.
- 2.6. **Tackling barriers and bottlenecks:** Whilst UNICEF was successful in identifying barriers and bottlenecks to inclusive education, solutions for eliminating these were not a key component of the priority-setting agenda in most countries. Further, some of the solutions suggested were not always feasible or actionable.
- 2.7. **Mobilizing national resources to implementing UNICEF strategies:** UNICEF aims (e.g., abolishing FGM, strengthening child protection services, increasing birth registrations, and ending early child marriage) were strongly aligned with national and regional frameworks. However, while governments often agree on policy principles, they are unwilling to commit resources to implementing UNICEF strategies.
- 2.8. **Involvement of boys and girls in promoting gender equality:** There is evidence of decreasing FGM. However, a number of issues still remain. The involvement of adolescent boys has not been systematic, which may hamper efforts to facilitate girls' empowerment.
- 2.9. **Gender programming:** Projects that embraced gender programming tended to be more successful and sustainable. However, the involvement of women is sometimes at the expense of promoting other marginalised groups.
- 2.10. **Leaving no one behind:** Efforts to reach the most vulnerable girls have not yet reached the most remote areas, and disability needs have not been addressed systematically.
- 2.11. **Technology-driven solutions to programming:** While most initiatives are technology-driven and supported by a conducive programming environment, they are often fragmented, and UNICEF involvement is sometimes opportunistic. In addition, most activities were not clearly innovative.

2.12. **Implementing through existing mechanisms and local capacities:** Using existing mechanisms and local capacity improved efficiency if implemented well; however, poor implementation was a barrier.

3. **Areas where UNICEF can improve**

3.1. **Exit strategies and programme timeframes:** The sustainability of projects is hampered by poor exit strategies, which can lead to a decline in progress at the end of the funding period. Other factors limiting sustainability include short programme timeframes, which prevent investment in community engagement, failure to secure revenue to support the continuation of the project and little long-term, sustainable, and predictable financing.

3.2. **Focus on the 'high-hanging fruit':** Similarly, donors, governments and UNICEF prioritise quantifiable results; and private donations tend to be smaller with shorter timelines, which are not sufficient for larger-scale, sustainable outcomes. Taken together, this means that much of the 'low-hanging fruit' has been addressed, with less focus on more complex projects requiring longer durations and greater funding. However, high-level reforms are encouraging fewer and longer-term partnerships which may address this area.

3.3. **Underserved groups:** There are missed opportunities with underserved groups, such as failing to reach young girls before their first pregnancy.

3.4. **Shared understanding of more complex approaches:** Improving the shared understanding of the definition of inclusive education. Some stakeholders considered this to mean increasing access to education for disabled children. UNICEF's principle of inclusive education, particularly regarding gender equality and including gender education mainstreaming, was often not coherent with national priorities. Similarly, UNICEF has yet to endorse and communicate a clear conceptual framework for child protection systems strengthening (CPSS). As a result, the organization lacks a shared understanding of the concept; and there are limited tools, resources and guidance for staff, partners and other stakeholders on how to implement CPSS.

3.5. **Data analytics, monitoring, evaluation and knowledge management:** Data collection, reporting and quality were often insufficient to assess the uptake and effectiveness of UNICEF contributions. The reasons for this include incomplete data collection, selection bias, use of inappropriate technology and a focus on the number of results rather than the quality. Likewise, the UNICEF approach to knowledge management was disjointed with different priorities across the sector and a misalignment between private companies and other stakeholders. Stronger and better-implemented monitoring and evaluation would improve evidence-based programming by national governments. Adequate, frequent monitoring and evaluation improves programme relevance and, therefore, effectiveness, strengthens monitoring systems, allows programme adjustment and improves progress tracking. Sufficient time, resources, and expertise must be invested for effective measurement.

3.6. **Human resources capacities and learning solutions:** Dissemination and training initiatives are top-down and thus did not always match country office demand. There is a disconnect

between staff background/qualifications with the change in UNICEF programming from purely technical to enabling system-strengthening approaches.

4. Key enablers

- 4.1. **UNICEF's network and national influence:** UNICEF is well positioned, influential in national policy-making and is a strong presence at the decentralised level.
- 4.2. **Relevance and appropriateness of programmes:** UNICEF is responsive to needs, generally aligned with national policy and inclusive of all stakeholders and considers their views. These factors ensure that its work is relevant to the programme settings.
- 4.3. **Top-down to bottom-up coordination:** The most effective coordination included appropriate engagement with bodies such as Ministries of Health and inclusion of health authorities at sub-national levels. UNICEF collaborate at the highest level of national governments and support them in designing and implementing effective strategies. At the bottom level, it has built good partnerships with stakeholders and the community to enable the division of tasks and deliver programmes more effectively.
- 4.4. **UNICEF's internal structure,** including its capacity and continuous in-country presence before, during and after emergencies.
- 4.5. **Preparedness is a key facilitator,** including UNICEF's investment in and knowledge of the preparedness of the underlying social protection systems.
- 4.6. **Expansion of existing infrastructure and programmes** facilitates rapid response at scale. Leveraging existing data, platforms, and relationships helps to protect populations and ensure the continuity of services.

5. Key barriers

- 5.1. **UNICEF's work was not always relevant to systems strengthening,** nor does the organization fully leverage its position to achieve system-strengthening goals.
- 5.2. **Staffing constraints** have limited UNICEF's ability to provide adequate technical leadership capacities. This is particularly the case in some of the smaller and less well-funded country offices. Low staff capacity, availability and experience, high turnover and insufficiently resourced sub-national staff are an ongoing barrier.
- 5.3. **Developing effective partnerships,** especially engaging with partner countries, requires considerable time and effort, and individuals representing their agencies lack the capacity to develop these.
- 5.4. **Lack of evidence-based processes for innovation:** It is not always clear how a particular innovation was identified, on what evidence it was based or what process led to its selection.
- 5.5. **Monitoring and evaluation:** There are several barriers in terms of monitoring and evaluation. First, evidence of effectiveness is more often in terms of inputs, activities, and outputs and less often in terms of outcomes. In addition, there is a lack of focus on achieving outcomes and/or clarity on what results or success look like. Secondly, there are insufficient data to track efficiency gains at the project or intervention levels. Data generated were sometimes inconsistent and therefore contested, and tended to prioritise

quantity over quality. Thirdly, there is still limited unification of the planning, monitoring and reporting systems across UNICEF's donors and partners. Hence, the quality of reports and how contributions are expressed differ significantly by country and agency. Fourthly, since responses to indicator questions change little from one period to the next, they do not provide dynamic data for analysis or timely data for decision-making. The reasons for these barriers include: a lack of accountability and incentives which means little timely follow-up or actions once decisions are taken; a lack of financial and human resource capacity for data collection, analysis and interpretation; and weak national data systems, which do not provide sufficient evidence to monitor progress, meaning that a new programme is developed and implemented without sufficient evidence to support it.

- 5.6. **Commitment from national governments:** Governments are unwilling to commit spending or resources, and sometimes there is low political will for change. In addition, efforts are sometimes hampered by complex frameworks between government agencies and bureaucracy.
- 5.7. **Reaching the most vulnerable children** remains a challenge. For example, child helpline services have been set up in many countries, but the upsurge in reporting has outpaced the capacity of child protection authorities to manage cases. Thus, their ability to help disempowered children is limited. Further, there is a significant imbalance of service quality in different country regions.
- 5.8. **Communication with affected populations:** Inadequate or inappropriate methods of communication to communities, meaning that this is sometimes via word of mouth with its attendant risk of spreading misinformation.

CONCLUSIONS

The following overall conclusions were found:

6. Overall positive areas:

- 6.1. UNICEF's strong and recognised leadership, advocacy and convening roles
- 6.2. Strong partnerships with governments; good alignment with national priorities and plans
- 6.3. Leveraging funding by focusing on approaches that are a key priority for its partners, and efficient use of funds
- 6.4. Increasing staff, partner and beneficiary numbers and improving skills and capacity
- 6.5. The relevance of UNICEF's work to programme settings and the target communities, families and children
- 6.6. Mapping and assessment have been important opportunities to build a shared vision across stakeholders
- 6.7. Evidence generation allows national partners to develop policies and action plans

7. Overall areas for improvement:

- 7.1. Improve collaboration with IFIs, the private sector, NGOs and local governance, especially at the sub-national level
- 7.2. Continue community training beyond the initial phase
- 7.3. Ensure that staff background and qualifications are relevant to the programme

- 7.4. Improve sub-national staff resources and further increase numbers: this may help to decrease turnover and low availability
- 7.5. Investment in stronger and better-implemented monitoring and evaluation methods to gather robust and reliable data via appropriate methods relevant to the country and its data systems. This would allow timely adjustment to programmes to improve the effectiveness as well as progress tracking
- 7.6. Long-term sustainability of projects via appropriate exit strategies, financing timeframes, investment in community engagement and donor selection

RECOMMENDATIONS

8. The key recommendations are:
 - 8.1. **Improve the quality of data collection and reporting by enhancing national data systems** – particularly those currently weak. This will highlight which interventions have been successful and enable evidence-based interventions to be delivered at national and sub-national levels. Additionally, this will ensure that the scaling up of local pilot interventions is better prioritised, underpinned by robust evidence and reduce the risk of resources being poorly used.
 - 8.2. **Address the lack of capacity in underserved groups** by providing follow-up training, knowledge dissemination, and clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of staff in local communities. This will improve workforce capacity to deliver programmes effectively and sustainably despite high staff turnover.
 - 8.3. **Facilitate the transition from national governments simply being aligned with UNICEF goals to implementing programmes** and committing the necessary resources to reach these goals. This can be achieved through providing more resources for training and capacity development, implementing and enforcing legal frameworks, and setting clear, measurable targets to incentivise long-term commitment and impact.
 - 8.4. **Develop clear conceptual frameworks regarding key definitions such as equity and inclusivity** to ensure there is a shared understanding between UNICEF, partners and stakeholders.
 - 8.5. **Ensure that when barriers are identified by UNICEF, the solutions recommended to address them are actionable and realistic** in a country-specific context. This should consider the resources available, political will for change and ability to reach the most vulnerable.
 - 8.6. **Enhancing local capacity improves the preparedness of national systems**, which in turn enhances the efficiency of operational processes. UNICEF could use its expertise here to help Governments implement a more predictive, resilient approach to sudden events.

Appendix 1

The UNICEF evaluation reports analysed in this summary are:

Goal Area 1: Every child, including adolescents, survives and thrives with access to nutritious diets, quality primary health care, nurturing practices and essential supplies

[Evaluation of the H4+ Joint Programme \(the joint initiative of six United Nations agencies for technical support of the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health\)](#) (2018)

[Evaluation of the UNICEF contribution to health systems strengthening](#) (2018)

[Independent evaluation of the United Nations system response to AIDS 2016– 2019](#) (2020)

[Joint evaluability assessment of the Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All](#) (2020)

[Evaluation of early childhood development and early stimulation and care](#) (2021)

Goal Area 2: Every child, including adolescents, learns and acquires skills for the future

[Evaluation of the Out-of-School Children Initiative](#) (2018)

[Evaluation of UNICEF girls' education portfolio \(2009–2015\)](#) (2018)

[Making evaluation work for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 target 5: Equality and inclusion in education](#) (2019)

[Formative evaluation of inclusive education for children with disabilities](#) (2020)

Goal Area 3: Every child, including adolescents, is protected from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and harmful practices

[Joint evaluability assessment \(2018\) and independent midterm review \(2019\) of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage](#) (2019)

[Strengthening child protection systems: Evaluation of UNICEF strategies and programme performance](#) (2019)

[Evaluation of the Joint UNFPA-UNICEF Programme on Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation, Phase III](#) (2021)

[Evaluation of UNICEF work in strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems](#) (2021)

Goal Area 4: Every child, including adolescents, has access to water, sanitation and hygiene and lives in a safe and sustainable climate and environment

[Evaluation of UNICEF drinking water supply programming in rural areas and small towns \(2006–2016\)](#) (2018)

[Evaluation synthesis of United Nations system work towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 6](#) (2021)

Goal Area 5: Every child, including adolescents, has access to inclusive social protection and lives free from poverty

[Evaluation of approaches to social protection programming in humanitarian situations, focusing on cash-based programming](#) (2021)

[Evaluation of UNICEF's work for children in urban settings](#) (2020)

Appendix 2

The countries covered by this summary are:

East Asia and the Pacific

Indonesia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Thailand, Viet Nam

Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Armenia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Ukraine

Western Europe

Spain

Latin America and the Caribbean

Belize, Brazil, Dominica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Jamaica, Peru, Uruguay

Middle East and North Africa

Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Yemen

South Asia


Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

Eastern and Southern Africa

Botswana, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda, Zimbabwe

West and Central Africa

Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of the Congo, The Gambia, Togo



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