

Evaluation of UNICEF's Reasonable Accommodation Fund



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What is reasonable accommodation?

A reasonable accommodation (RA) is what an employer does for an employee or applicant with disability to remove a workplace barrier.

The Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities (CRPD) defines reasonable accommodation as

“ **necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.** ”

Reasonable accommodations can be categorized into cost and no-cost accommodations. Cost-based accommodations involve expenses incurred by the organization to fulfil the accommodation request, such as purchasing assistive technology such as screen readers for employees with visually impairments, or hiring sign language interpreters for job applicants or work related personal assistance. No-cost accommodations are adjustments that do not require financial expenditure, such as flexible work arrangements, or telecommuting options.

Persons with disabilities often face significant challenges in the workplace, as work environments are often not adapted to their needs and requirements. UNICEF has made the inclusion of persons with disabilities a priority both in its programme work and within the organization. The organization's Reasonable Accommodation Fund plays a central role in this respect.

The Fund is administered through UNICEF's Division of Human Resources and its request and decision-making process is managed by the organization's Culture and Diversity team in the Office of the Executive Director. To inform its future design and approach, UNICEF's Culture and Diversity team requested an evaluation of the Fund, which was carried out by UNICEF's Evaluation Office, supported by a team of two external experts.

The purpose of the evaluation was to ensure that the Fund meets the needs and expectations of all UNICEF personnel that require its support, and to inform its future design and approach so that it is fit for purpose in supporting the achievement of the goals set out in UNICEF's Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy (DIPAS) 2022-2030. The evaluation assessed the extent to which the Fund is consistent with good and proven practices and with relevant guidelines, namely the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS); its relevance within the organization and coherence with other related instruments and policies; whether it is clearly and consistently organized and communicated; and its main achievements to date.

Data collection methods and analysis

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, including 96 key informant interviews, an online survey of UNICEF staff with disabilities, which received 142 responses, and a document and literature review. Data sources were analysed and triangulated, leading to the distillation of findings, conclusions and recommendations, which were discussed in validation workshops and reviewed by key stakeholders and experts.



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The evaluation approach was structured around three key perspectives:

1. examining the Fund as a policy crafted and provided by the organization;
2. assessing the implementation of related processes; and
3. analysing its effectiveness in delivering results.

The evaluation was guided by a human rights-based and gender-sensitive approach and by the principles of accessibility, transparency, meaningful participation, and ownership.

Conclusions



The evaluation found that the provision of reasonable accommodation is essential to enable persons with disabilities to apply for jobs and perform essential job functions. With the Fund, UNICEF has made significant efforts to provide costed RA to employees with disabilities.



The Fund has been effective in the provision of reasonable accommodation, contributing significantly to an equitable and enabling work environment. The Fund's approach is in line with international standards, and it has adopted several good and proven practices from the private and public sectors, notably a centralized fund, a self-referral pathway (meaning that individuals can make their own request privately, without the need for a supervisor sign-off), and an online application form. However, there are other important and well-documented practices that have yet to be adopted.



The Fund complements other internal accessibility mechanisms, creating a more comprehensive approach to promoting an inclusive environment for persons with disabilities. However, the coherence among these systems is unclear and should be streamlined, including how RA relates to occupational health and safety and UN Medical when it comes to the recruitment, support, and retention of persons with different types of disabilities.



More needs to be done to ensure that all staff members are aware of reasonable accommodation and know how to submit and support requests. Consistent internal information about the Fund exists and efforts were made to raise awareness on disability and reasonable accommodation through targeted webinars and all-staff communications. That said, the understanding of disability, reasonable accommodation, and the Fund still varies widely within the organization.



While there is a well-established process to apply for reasonable accommodation, related procedures can be further clarified and a written operations manual is needed, as indicated by inconsistencies in the quality of requesters' experience after approval, particularly regarding procurement at the country and regional levels. Some of the questions on the online reasonable accommodation application form should be revised to make them clearer for users.



While the current budget for the Fund adequately addresses present demands, concerns persist regarding its sufficiency to meet future goals, requiring careful consideration of budgeting approaches. The evaluation also highlights the importance of ensuring the right composition of the RA Advisory Committee, which plays a role in approving requests above a certain amount, to ensure both broad representation and appropriate expertise, and to avoid potential conflicts of interest if committee members are also in positions to advise personnel with disabilities, for example through Disability Connect (UNICEF's employee resource group for persons with disabilities).



The evaluation advocates for a holistic approach, covering both accommodations with and without costs, to be handled by an RA Office/one-stop shop. While the scope of the evaluation focused on the Fund, which handles accommodations with a cost, research shows that the majority of accommodations do not have a cost. Therefore, moving to a centralized accommodation programme or 'one-stop shop' model would provide UNICEF with a standardized approach to ensure every employee with disability has what they need to perform the essential functions of their job on an equal basis with others.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1



UNICEF should **transition from an RA Fund to an RA Office**, with accountability to senior leadership and dedicated staff to manage it. The RA Office should act as a 'one-stop shop' (single point of entry for the provision of services), using a case management approach, with the authority to issue 'accommodation passports' that would facilitate and advise on RA for employees with disabilities, while ensuring that personal information is stored appropriately, and key communication is in the applicant's preferred UN language, if requested.

Recommendation 2



To **ensure that employees and applicants are aware of and can access reasonable accommodation**, UNICEF should strengthen its internal and external measures to effectively communicate the organization's commitment to provide RA and how to request it.

Recommendation 3



UNICEF should **strengthen organization-wide strategies, training, and communication activities** towards achieving a truly disability-inclusive and accessible workplace. This is necessary to support the provision of RA and to work towards the goals of the DIPAS, particularly the target of 7 per cent of employees being persons with disabilities by 2030.

Recommendation 4



UNICEF should continue **to approve all RA requests that meet the criteria and ensure their consistent and effective provision** across the organization in line with international best practices, while addressing existing issues in RA guidance and procedures.

Recommendation 5



To ensure quality **assurance and user satisfaction**, UNICEF's RA Fund/Office should use an appropriate set of tools and practices to monitor and evaluate the provision of RA to employees and applicants across the organization.

Recommendation 6



UNICEF should **regularly review RA expenditure and recruitment activities** (i.e., hiring persons with disabilities and any targeted recruitment) to ensure that additional funds can be quickly allocated to RA as needed to support personnel with disabilities.

Recommendation 7



UNICEF should **review the composition of the RA Committee**, which decides on requests over US\$2,500, to ensure broad representation and appropriate expertise and avoid potential conflicts of interests if committee members are also in positions to advise personnel with disabilities, for example through Disability Connect.

Recommendation 8



UNICEF should continue to **share knowledge and experience on reasonable accommodation with other UN organizations** to promote collaboration and learning in this area and the effective inclusion and non-discrimination of persons with disabilities.