EVALUATION

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Evaluation report

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Evaluation of Innovation in UNICEF

Evaluation of Innovation in UNICEF
Final report

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Preface

Innovation is central to UNICEF's mission to deliver results for children in an increasingly complex world of deepening inequalities and growing demands for more inclusive, efficient, and scalable solutions. As a designated change strategy in the UNICEF Strategic Plans 2018–2021 and 2022–2025, innovation has been positioned not as a peripheral activity, but as a cross-cutting enabler to accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals and realize the rights of every child.

This evaluation of innovation in UNICEF covers the period from 2019 to 2024 and incorporates recent organizational developments in 2025. It provides a timely and comprehensive assessment of how well the organization is positioned to use innovation to achieve results at scale. It examines the systems, structures, and capacities that support innovation across the organization and offers forward-looking recommendations to inform the new Strategic Plan period (2026–2029).

The evaluation found that UNICEF made significant progress since the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation in embedding innovation into its institutional architecture. A three-tier governance model was established, innovation funding was tripled, an innovation strategy was developed, and new tools were introduced to guide decision-making and evidence generation. UNICEF's innovation approaches, ranging from the Venture Fund and global portfolios to large-scale initiatives like Giga or smaller pilots like Cboard, demonstrated reach, relevance, and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Yet the evaluation also highlights persistent challenges. While UNICEF has positioned itself as a thought leader in the global innovation ecosystem, strategic focus, internal coherence, and oversight systems require further strengthening. Innovation capacity remains concentrated at headquarters and the capabilities and partnerships needed to carry innovation from promising pilots to sustainable, system-level impact are not yet consistently in place. Outcome-level data is not routinely collected or monitored, and inclusion, ethics, and child participation are inconsistently applied.

Building on this progress, UNICEF now stands at a pivotal moment in its innovation journey. As the organization undergoes structural transformation due to decreasing financial resources, it must consolidate its gains and implement a more disciplined and inclusive approach to innovation. As UNICEF prepares for its next Strategic Plan cycle, the evaluation calls for sharper prioritization, stronger systems for financial tracking, monitoring, evidence generation and learning; deeper integration of ethics, equity, and child participation across all innovation efforts; continuing investment in the Acceleration and Transition to Scale stages; and strengthening long-term partnerships to support sustainability.

The evaluation reflects UNICEF's commitment to continuous learning and organizational improvement. It draws on robust, triangulated evidence, including the perspectives of over 1,200 internal and external stakeholders across all regions and levels of the organization. I extend my sincere thanks to all who contributed to this important process.

Innovation in UNICEF is about systematically identifying, validating, and scaling solutions that accelerate results for children. As this evaluation shows, UNICEF has laid a strong foundation. The next step is to embed innovation more deeply across the organization, guided by evidence, equity, and a commitment to sustainable, system-level impact.



Robert McCouch
Director of Evaluation
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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADDA	Africa Data and Drone Academy
ADT	Accessible Digital Textbooks
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Performance in Humanitarian Action
CO	Country Office
COAR	Country Office Annual Report
COE	Centre of Excellence
CPD	Country Programme Documents
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DAPM	Division of Analysis, Planning and Monitoring (integrated in *Office of Strategy and Evidence* (OSE) in 2025)
DFAM	Division of Financial and Administrative Management
DHR	Division of Human Resources (renamed *Division of People and Culture* (DPC) in 2024)
DID	Digital Impact Division
DPC	Division of People and Culture
DPG	Digital Public Good
DPGA	Digital Public Goods Alliance
Dx	Digital Transformation
EO	Evaluation Office
EMOPS	Emergency Operations
ESARO	East and Southern Africa Regional Office
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GAHI	Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation
GIC	Generic Intervention Code
GCA	Division of Global Communication and Advocacy
GHL	Global Humanitarian Lab
GIC	Generic Intervention Code
GIB	Global Innovation Board
GIPs	Global Innovation Portfolios
GORAF	Global Office of Research and Foresight (integrated in *Office of Strategy and Evidence* (OSE) in 2025)
GPD	Global Programme Division
GSMA	Global System for Mobile Association
GSSC	Global Shared Services Centre
HQ	Headquarters
HR	Human Resource
ICTD	Information and Communications Technology Division (renamed *Digital Impact Division* (DID) in 2025)
IF	Innovative Finance
ISC	Innovation Steering Committee
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
KII	Key Informant Interview
LACRO	Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office
LIH	Learning Innovation Hub
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MENARO	Middle East and North Africa Regional Office
NGO	Non-governmental organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OMP	Office Management Plan

OoI	Office of Innovation
OSE	Office of Strategy and Evidence
PFP	Division of Private Fundraising and Partnerships
PG	Programme Group (renamed *Global Programme Division* (GPD) in 2025)
PIC	Product Innovation Centre
PIDB	Programme Information Database
PPD	Public Partnerships Division
PwD	Persons with disabilities
R&I	Research and Innovation
R&D	Research and Development
RO	Regional Office
ROI	Return on investment
ROSA	Regional Office for South Asia
SAR	South Asia Region
SD	Supply Division
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIC	Specific Intervention Code
SOP	Standard Operations Procedure
T4D	Technology for Development
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIN	United Nations Innovation Network
VF	Venture Fund
VFM	Value for money
VII	Vaccine Independence Initiative
VISION	Virtual Integrated System of Information
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WCARO	West and Central Africa Regional Office
WFP	World Food Programme

Glossary of innovation terms

To guide the evaluation, the following UNICEF definitions were used:

Innovation

"A new or significantly improved solution that contributes to progress for children and accelerates results for children or young people. It is about doing new things to solve problems and improve the lives of children around the world. It is about matching today's challenges with tomorrow's solutions."

– UNICEF (2020) UNICEF Global Innovation Strategy and Framework 2.0: The ABC of Innovation. Matching today's challenges with tomorrow's solutions.

The definition underscores UNICEF's aim to leverage innovation as a means to enhance its programming and impact for children worldwide. It is a broad definition that incorporates innovations at different levels of ambition.[1] It includes innovations for programming in five categories: Data, Digital, Innovative Finance (IF), Product and Social.[2]

Innovation cycle

UNICEF describes an innovation cycle that goes from Ideation, Pilot, Acceleration, Transition to Scale and Scale.[3] The Product Innovation Centre (PIC) uses a slightly different cycle based on its distinct processes from Exploration, Need, Research and Development (R&D), Validation, and Transition to Scale.

Scale

Increased reach and depth of an innovation, including geographic expansion, increased user uptake and institutional adoption, supported by evidence of effectiveness and adaptability to diverse contexts. The 5D Framework defines scale as the adoption and operation of a solution at the desired level, sustained by an ecosystem of actors and describes that "innovating at scale means making a transformational impact for children at the national level and across multiple countries". The Framework highlights that scalability depends on strategic alignment, proven need, team capacity, adaptability and reliable resourcing.

The UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022–2025 states that "Priority projects for scale are in multiple countries and reaching more than 1 million people."[4] This definition is applied to innovations implemented throughout the evaluation period, wherever relevant data is available. Innovations from the PIC are assessed based on uptake and demand in the Supply Catalogue.



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Executive summary

Introduction

With its global reach and operational footprint in some of the world's most fragile settings, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is uniquely positioned to harness innovation to drive meaningful change. Innovation was one of nine "change strategies" in the UNICEF Strategic Plans for 2018–2021 and 2022–2025, central to accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and advancing children's rights. UNICEF defines innovation as "a new or significantly improved solution that contributes to progress for children and accelerates results for children or young people." This approach spans five categories: data, digital, innovative finance, product, and social innovations.

UNICEF has a long and distinguished record of innovation, ranging from cold chain systems for vaccine distribution in the 1970s, to the Mark II handpump in the 1990s, and U-Report in the 2010s. It established one of the sector's first Innovation Units in 2008, followed by a Global Innovation Centre in 2015, continually evolving its model. Currently, innovation is operationalized through multiple entities, including the Office of Innovation (OoI), the Product Innovation Centre (PIC), the Technology for Development (T4D) function within the Information and Communications Technology Division (ICTD, renamed the Digital Impact Division (DID) in 2025), and an Innovative Finance (IF) Hub. These work in partnership with the Programme Group (PG, renamed the Global Programme Division (GPD) in 2025) and with regional and country offices (ROs/COs).

The overall purpose of this evaluation was to assess UNICEF's innovation journey over the past five years, capturing results, identifying barriers, and offering insights to inform implementation of the next Strategic Plan 2026–2029. The evaluation provides an independent assessment of UNICEF's 'fitness for purpose' to use innovation as a change strategy to achieve transformational organizational outcomes. It serves both accountability and learning purposes across four key objectives:

- **Objective 1:** To assess the relevance, coherence and sustainability of UNICEF institutional arrangements to integrate innovation as a change strategy;
- **Objective 2:** To examine the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of UNICEF's innovation approaches;

- **Objective 3:** To assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of innovation initiatives in enhancing programme effectiveness and accelerating positive outcomes for children; and
- **Objective 4:** To identify and analyse enabling and hindering factors influencing innovation within UNICEF, including the generation of new knowledge and thought leadership to influence the innovation ecosystem and advance child rights.

The evaluation had a global cross-organizational scope. It covered the period 2019–2024 and selected developments in 2025, spanning two Strategic Plan cycles (2018–2021 and 2022–2025). It assessed innovation as a global, cross-organizational approach across all seven UNICEF regions, with a focus on its positioning as a change strategy, including systems, processes, governance, capacity, resourcing, partnerships and organizational culture. The scope encompassed innovation initiatives across multiple divisions and at different organizational levels.

Methodology

The evaluation used a participatory, mixed-methods approach, including a comprehensive document review (541 documents); portfolio analysis of innovation data dashboards; a global staff survey with 982 respondents (40 per cent women, 53 per cent men, 7 per cent prefer not to say, achieving a 8.4 per cent response rate that exceeded the target and met criteria for statistical significance); in-person and remote consultation with 277 stakeholders (207 key informant interviews and 21 focus group discussions with UNICEF staff, partners, duty bearers and right-holders); and seven regional thematic case studies, with in-person data collection in four countries. Data was triangulated across sources to ensure robust findings.

Key findings

Institutional arrangements for innovation

UNICEF made substantial progress since the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation in embedding innovation into its institutional architecture. This included the establishment of a formal three-tier governance system, portfolio management frameworks, and new tools for innovation teams. Staff awareness grew and innovation funding tripled. Yet progress has been uneven: dedicated innovation capacity and management structures remain concentrated at headquarters (HQ), and consistent innovation delivery across UNICEF's decentralised operations remains a challenge.

The Global Innovation Board (GIB) and the Innovation Steering Committee (ISC) improved coordination, with the ISC particularly effective at facilitating cross-divisional dialogue. However, the GIB needs to define sharper innovation priorities and to guide resource allocation beyond broad thematic areas. Governance is also insufficiently linked to adjacent structures, such as the Digital Transformation (Dx) Board, and there are challenges coordinating across digital, data, and innovation.

While innovation approaches align with UNICEF's strategic goal areas and the SDGs, the absence of clear priorities has led to a perception of ad hoc decision-making in resource allocation, driven more by opportunity than by strategy. The PIC has a well-defined responsibility for product innovation, but the boundaries are blurred between digital innovation and digital transformation.

UNICEF's innovation resources tripled from US$32 million in 2019 to US$116 million in 2024, fuelled by UNICEF Set Aside funding allocations in 2020 and 2021 and flexible funding from European governments, private sector donors and philanthropists. While nearly one third of this funding supported global innovation portfolios managed by the OoI, the remaining 70 per cent – largely from ICTD (now DID) and COs – has not been tracked and is likely underreported due to systemic limitations in UNICEF's financial coding. With 60 per cent of the recorded OoI portfolio budget (2019–2024) allocated to the Acceleration stage, UNICEF has been able to achieve impressive reach and scale for at least 19 initiatives. However, there is limited evidence on the outcomes or impacts of the investments for children.

UNICEF's innovation partnerships spanned academia, the private sector, governments and United Nations (UN) agencies. It co-chairs the UN Innovation Network and has had high-profile collaborations with partners such as Lego and Ericsson. Partnerships have enabled greater experimentation, new solutions, and new ways of working. Yet some private-sector partners would have sought more strategic collaborations beyond funding, and smaller partners struggle with procurement processes. Host government partnerships proved to be critical for sustainability and scaling, though some top-down digital solutions faced sustainability challenges.

UNICEF made progress in recognizing risk as integral to innovation through its 5D Framework and has taken substantial risks in innovative pilots and investments. However, practical tools for systematic risk identification and mitigation remain underdeveloped, limiting a shift toward an organization-wide culture of informed risk-taking. Despite variance between UNICEF levels and offices, a persistent risk aversion and reluctance to embrace failure emerged in the evaluation, with only 26 per cent of staff reporting a high tolerance for risk-taking, and only 28 per cent agreeing failure was welcomed as a learning opportunity. Staff described a culture driven by reputational considerations, and rigid procedures, accountability and hierarchy. Technical expertise and availability for innovation and innovation management are mostly in HQ, and only 6 per cent of COs have dedicated innovation staff.

Innovation approaches

UNICEF employs diverse organizational approaches to innovation across multiple divisions and functions. The evaluation reviewed seven approaches spanning four HQ divisions and different functions, including: exploring frontier technologies (i.e., Nodes, Venture Fund), supporting scalable solutions (i.e., Portfolios, Hubs, PIC), enabling field-level innovation (e.g., Global Network), and providing new models for delivering school connectivity (i.e., Giga).

These approaches align with strategic priorities but lack strong cross-divisional coherence. They align with the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 and the SDGs, with largest investments concentrated in health, education and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). Several approaches have a strong gender or disability focus. Yet disjointed governance, systems and processes across divisions managing innovation resources limited strategic coherence and a shared narrative about innovation's contributions.

Innovation approaches have achieved significant reach, though evidence on comparative advantage and outcomes remains limited. Giga improved school connectivity for 11 million children, Bebbo reached over 1million parents, and over 1 million Complementary Feeding Bowls were distributed. The Venture Fund invested in 60 start-ups since 2019, and the PIC added 92 products to the Supply Catalogue. However, data on comparative advantage and innovation outcomes remain thin. Only one approach (Nodes) conducted a formal cost-efficiency analysis comparing their work to existing alternatives.

Beyond funding and supporting innovation initiatives, the approaches also played a normative role. They co-founded the Digital Public Goods Alliance (DPGA), co-led Giga with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and contributed to the Global Digital Compact to embed equity, open access, and child rights within global innovation structures.

More active portfolio management is needed to strengthen innovation performance and sustainability. This includes pausing or exiting underperforming initiatives to free up resources for those demonstrating stronger results. More robust mechanisms for testing the likelihood of different pathways to scale would also improve resource use and sustainability.

Innovation initiatives

Innovation initiatives achieved strong reach and alignment but limited measurable outcome evidence. Sixteen case studies from across the seven regions were examined through a case study analysis and country visits. All 16 innovation initiatives were successfully delivered, achieving their intended reach, well-aligned with regional and country strategies, and demonstrating strong potential for impact. However, evidence on how reach translated into measurable outcomes for children was limited.

Equity and gender considerations were present but not systematically embedded across initiatives. Several initiatives specifically targeted girls and young women (i.e., Oky), children with disabilities (i.e., Cboard, Accessible Digital Textbooks) and children in vulnerable situations (i.e., La Travesía Videogame for migrant children). Yet, equity and gender considerations were not systematically embedded and disaggregated data collection was inconsistent, limiting child-centred design processes. While gender-focused initiatives reached girls and young women, many initiatives remained gender-neutral in design, limiting their potential to address underlying social norms.

Cost-effectiveness and benchmarking remain underdeveloped. Some digital solutions demonstrated significant potential cost savings compared with traditional programming, but the initiatives had not undertaken cost-effectiveness analyses or benchmarking against alternatives.

Progress toward scale is visible, though sustained government adoption remains limited. Four initiatives met UNICEF's criteria for scale, each reaching over one million users, and at least nine expanded into multiple countries. Despite encouraging examples of government uptake, most initiatives remained dependent on UNICEF resources and technical support, with limited sustained government adoption or external funding. This was often hindered by constrained national resources, competing priorities, and political turnover.

Enabling factors and barriers

Leadership support and dedicated resources are critical enablers of innovation at UNICEF. Strong leadership, particularly at country and regional levels, emerged as the most important success factor. Additional enablers included dedicated innovation funding, allowing UNICEF to invest in the critical "missing middle" stage between piloting and full-scale implementation, as well as technical capacity and dedicated focal points to institutionalize innovation and facilitating cross-office collaboration.

Organizational risk aversion, weak evidence systems and rigid procedures constrain innovation. Limited acceptance of risk and failure constrained experimentation and learning. Weak monitoring, evaluation and evidence generation limited the ability to assess effectiveness and inform decision-making. UNICEF's complex and rigid compliance, procurement and partnership systems hindered agile innovation partnerships. Finally, the digital divide created challenges for implementing and scaling digital innovations in low-resource contexts.

Conclusions

UNICEF stands at a pivotal moment in its innovation journey. Over the past several years, UNICEF made significant strides in embedding innovation into its strategic planning, building foundational systems, governance, and technical capabilities. However, this progress is now at risk. The Future Focus Initiative (FFI) and broader organizational shifts have created both opportunities and vulnerabilities. The evaluation finds that while innovation is increasingly recognized as a driver of results, its strategic focus remains too broad, governance structures are fragmented, and systems for evidence, financial tracking, and accountability are underdeveloped. At the same time, innovation capacity is still concentrated at HQ, and a persistent culture of risk aversion further limits bold experimentation. Inclusion, ethics, and child participation are inconsistently applied, and outcomes for children are not routinely tracked.

To sustain its innovation momentum and leadership, UNICEF must now consolidate its gains, embed innovation more deeply and equitably across the organization, and invest in the systems, partnerships, and capabilities that will carry innovation from promising pilots to sustainable, system-level impact.

The following four lessons can guide UNICEF and its partners seeking to strengthen innovation:

1. **Invest in evidence generation:** Systematic monitoring, evaluation, and learning are essential to demonstrate innovation impact, assess comparative advantage, and inform strategic decisions.
2. **Build innovation capacity at all levels:** While central structures are important, local capacity is essential for relevant and scalable context-specific innovation.
3. **Different types of innovation require distinct pathways to scale:** Early planning around delivery models, financing, and ownership is critical to sustainability.
4. **Leverage the ecosystem:** Innovation efforts should balance early-stage development with building on existing solutions. Regularly assessing market fit and ecosystem dynamics helps avoid duplication and ensures value for money.

Recommendations

To sustain UNICEF's innovation momentum in a context of shrinking resources and ongoing restructuring, and to support the transition to innovation maturity, the evaluation presents five interlinked critical recommendations that were co-created through stakeholder consultations and validation workshops, and are presented in order of priority:

1. UNICEF should sharpen and narrow its innovation priorities, aligned with the Impact Result Areas of the Strategic Plan 2026–2029 to target solutions that accelerate measurable results for children.

- **Prioritization:** High
- **Timeframe:** 6 months
- **Responsibility:** Global Innovation Board (GIB), Digital Transformation Board (Dx Board), Centres of Excellence (CoEs), Office of Innovation (OoI)
- **Supporting units/divisions:** Digital Impact Division (DID), Global Programme Division (GPD), Office of Strategy and Evidence (OSE), Division of Private Fundraising and Partnerships (PFP), Supply Division (SD), regional offices (ROs) and country offices (COs)
- **Cost implications:** Low

2. UNICEF should maintain and strengthen its innovation management system during the ongoing restructuring to ensure strategic oversight, maintain institutional capability, and enable innovation across the organization.

- **Prioritization:** High
- **Timeframe:** 24 months
- **Responsibility:** GIB, OoI, DID, SD, CoEs
- **Supporting units/divisions:** GPD, OSE, Division of Financial and Administrative Management (DFAM), Division of People and Culture (DPC), ROs and COs
- **Cost implications:** High

3. UNICEF should strengthen the traceability of its innovation investments and results to better guide investment and stage gate decisions and ensure innovations are effective and efficient before Transition to Scale.

- Prioritization: High
- **Timeframe:** 6 months
- **Responsibility:** OoI, DID
- **Supporting units/divisions:** OSE, Evaluation Office (EO), CoEs, DFAM, SD
- **Cost implications:** Moderate

4. UNICEF should systematically integrate ethical safeguards, equity, inclusion and child participation across innovation processes to uphold child rights and ensure safe and inclusive outcomes for all children.

- **Prioritization:** Moderate
- **Timeframe:** 12 months
- **Responsibility:** OoI, CoEs
- **Supporting units/divisions:** OSE, DID, SD, PFP, ROs and COs
- **Cost implications:** Low/moderate

5. UNICEF should continue to invest in scaling innovations that demonstrate evidence-based promise or proven results, supporting their Acceleration, Transition to Scale and sustainable delivery through partnerships, business models and systems integration.

- **Prioritization:** Moderate
- **Timeframe:** 24 months
- **Responsibility:** OoI, CoEs
- **Supporting units/divisions:** OSE, PFP, Public Partnerships Division (PPD), SD, Division of Global Communication and Advocacy (GCA), ROs and COs
- **Cost implications:** Moderate/high

These areas reflect good practice in organizational innovation, align with the Innovation Management Standard (ISO 56002), and will be key to sustaining UNICEF's value in innovation and translating it into measurable results for children. Taken together, the recommendations aim to protect and evolve UNICEF's innovation capability, ensuring it remains a bold, ethical, and effective force for children in a rapidly changing global context.



1 Introduction

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is nearing the end of its current Strategic Plan (2022–2025). Innovation was recognised in the Strategic Plan as one of nine key change strategies essential to transforming the lives of children and young people. There is an urgent need for innovative, efficient and scalable solutions to reach the most vulnerable within the context of stagnating development progress and persistent and escalating global challenges, including increasing inequalities, humanitarian crises, conflict and climate change.

As part of its commitment to continuous learning and accountability under UNICEF's Plan for Global Evaluations (PGE) 2022–2025, the independent UNICEF Evaluation Office (EO) contracted the KonTerra Group (KonTerra) to conduct an evaluation of innovation. The evaluation was carried out between January 2025 and November 2025, with a team of six senior external consultants and two evaluation specialists (see Annex 7). The EO oversaw and coordinated the evaluation process with key stakeholders, in particular the Office of Innovation (OoI), the Global Innovation Board (GIB), and the Innovation Steering Committee (ISC).

The evaluation was conducted in the midst of significant changes at UNICEF including the development of a new Strategic Plan for 2026–2029 and the Future Focus Initiative (FFI) which aims to adjust resources and organizational structures at the global, regional and country levels to continue delivering effective programmes while reducing costs. The evaluation was designed to deliver real-time feedback and forward-looking recommendations, with early findings shared to guide both the development of the new Strategic Plan and FFI, ensuring the relevance of results for current and future contexts.

The report is structured into six sections: this introduction, background, the evaluation methodology, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The findings are structured into four sub-sections: an institutional assessment, assessment of approaches, an overview of 16 sampled innovation initiatives, and a synthesis of key enabling factors and barriers across UNICEF's innovation work. This is supplemented by a set of seven annexes, published in a separate document, including seven regional thematic case studies exploring the 16 sampled initiatives grouped by region. As per the Terms of Reference (ToR, see Annex 1) internal interim reports were prepared to provide real-time feedback. The preliminary evidence from interim reports has been fully integrated into this final report.


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2 Background

Context of the evaluation

Innovation in international development and humanitarian aid

The international development and humanitarian sectors are undergoing rapid changes, shaped by increasing conflict, climate change, shrinking Official Development Assistance (ODA) budgets, and donor governments shifting their interests away from development. As governments and donors reconsider how best to allocate scarce resources, questions of efficiency, prioritisation, and long-term impact have come to the forefront prompting serious reflection on the structures and systems used to deliver aid and development, and the role of innovation in transforming those systems for greater effectiveness.

In addition to these structural shifts, **the pace of technological change and the emergence of new global policy agendas, from AI governance to digital public infrastructure, demand that UNICEF continuously adapt its advocacy, programming, and partnerships**. Innovation provides a mechanism for building the foresight, agility, and cross-sectoral engagement needed to navigate such volatility and ensure that the organization remains a credible actor in shaping future systems that affect children.

In this context, **innovation emerges as a strategic necessity** offering a way to address systemic bottlenecks, improve efficiencies and unlock new mechanisms for reaching the most vulnerable. With its established reputation for operational delivery and access to children in regions most affected by conflict, climate change, and public health emergencies, UNICEF's innovation efforts offer valuable insights. This evaluation provides an opportunity to reflect on the organization's journey with innovation: what has worked, where challenges remain, and how these experiences can inform future efforts across the sector, especially at a time of heightened fiscal constraints.

Innovation is an inherently long-term endeavour. Research and experience from the wider development sector and the private sector suggest that sustained investment over 10 to 20 years is typically required before innovation portfolios and initiatives mature to deliver measurable results at scale. However, many of the initiatives and structures reviewed are still in their early stages. As such, the results observed should be viewed as early signals of progress or opportunities to pivot, not necessarily end-points, and as part of a broader learning curve for UNICEF and its partners.

Innovation in UNICEF

Over the last decade, innovation became an important strategic priority across the United Nations (UN) system, positioned as a critical enabler for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Innovation sits alongside data, digital solutions, foresight and behavioural science as part of the "quintet of change" to drive more inclusive, adaptive and results-oriented systems. Within this framework, UN entities made notable progress in embedding innovation: 90 per cent established dedicated innovation teams, 60 per cent developed innovation strategies, and 50 per cent established Centres of Excellence.[5] The formation of the UN Innovation Network (UNIN), co-chaired by UNICEF, reflected a growing desire for collaboration and knowledge-sharing across more than 70 UN organizations in 180 countries.[6]

UNICEF has a long history of testing and supporting innovations to scale to improve the lives of children. Notable examples include the Mark II handpump (1990s),[7] Child Survival Revolution (1980s),[8] Community Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM, 2000s),[9] U-Report (2011)[10] and RapidPro (2014).[11] UNICEF was one of the first UN agencies to develop specific innovation capacities, establishing an Innovation Unit in 2008[12] and a Global Innovation Centre in 2015.[13] It has led other agencies by emphasising open-source solutions and becoming an early signatory of the Principles for Digital Development.



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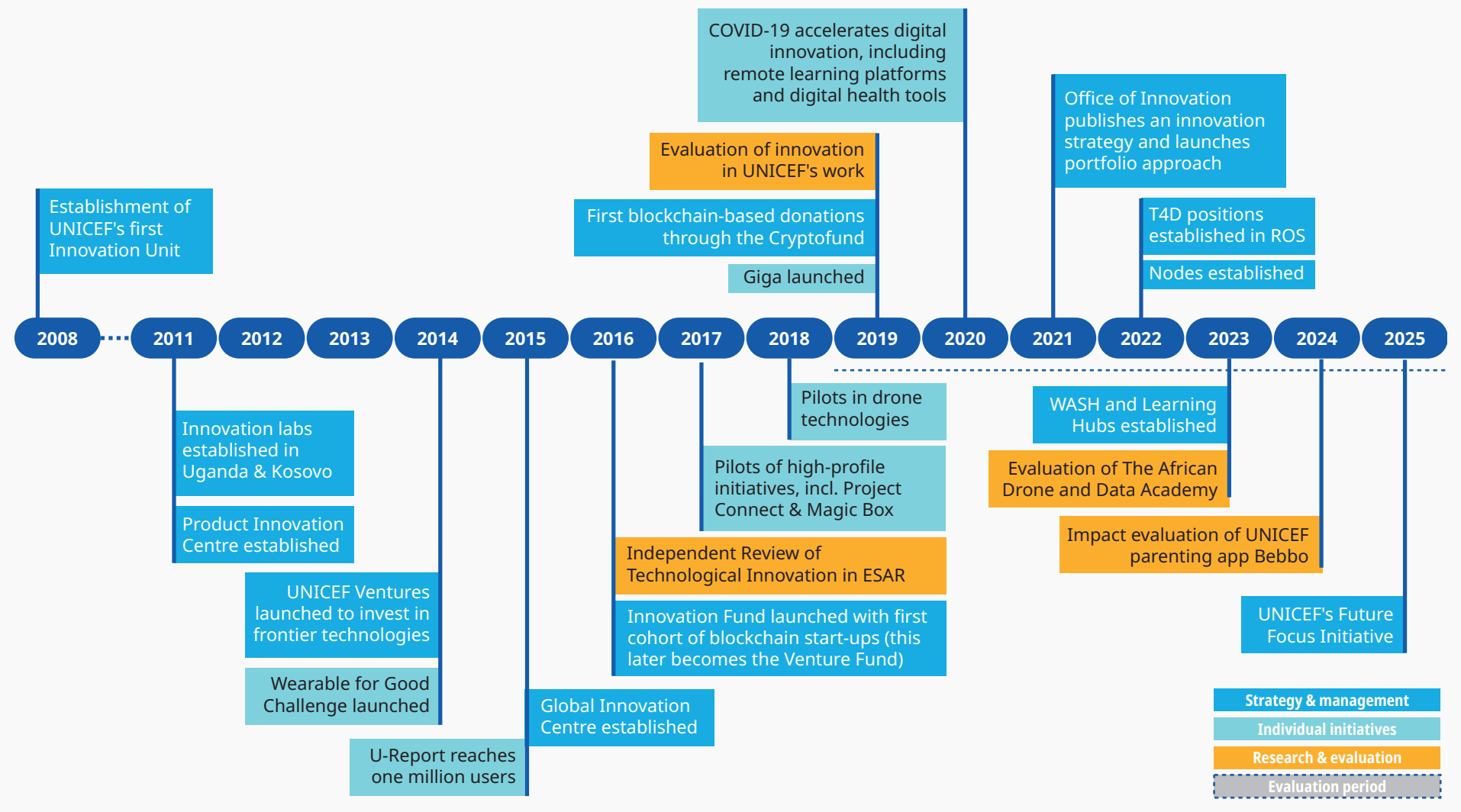
Innovation was recognised as a change strategy in UNICEF's Strategic Plans for 2018 –2021 and 2022–2025,[14],[15] which aimed to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. This meant focusing on intractable problems, stagnating progress and stubborn barriers and matching them with a portfolio of new solutions, with the belief that applying innovation to these problems will accelerate progress. By elevating innovation to an organizational change strategy, UNICEF aimed to build on the existing pockets of innovation, foster its culture and capacity to innovate and strengthen the innovation ecosystem.

An Innovation Strategy and Framework 2.0 provided a vision for embedding innovation across UNICEF. It outlined activities to leverage UNICEF's comparative advantage in scaling impactful innovations (Accomplishments), applying portfolio management to accelerate progress on key child-focused outcomes and influence broader innovation ecosystems (Bending the curve), and fostering a culture of learning, risk-taking, and collaboration (Capability and culture). A retrospective Theory of Change (ToC) for the OoI (not for innovation at UNICEF), developed in 2024 and endorsed by the OoI Innovation Management Team, positioned innovation on four interconnected outcomes: accelerating programmatic results through innovation at country and regional levels; strengthening and expanding local innovation ecosystems; enabling innovators and practitioners, including UNICEF staff, to make informed decisions based on evidence and insights; and embedding innovation within UNICEF's systems, structures and culture to ensure its sustainability and impact. This ToC described the underpinnings of the OoI approach to facilitate more innovative initiatives, practices and culture at UNICEF and beyond (see Annex 1.2). In 2025, the OoI developed a new ToC for its future work to articulate pathways to change and how it assumes they will happen.

Innovation governance, functions and structures

The operational structures for innovation at UNICEF have been redesigned and evolved multiple times to facilitate the integration of innovation.[16] A timeline of the key developments for innovation at UNICEF is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. A timeline of innovation at UNICEF[17]



Source: Compiled by the evaluation team

Over the period evaluated, UNICEF's innovation initiatives were wide-ranging, implemented through headquarters (HQ)-led global portfolios, regional hubs and country-level initiatives. They include digital innovations like Bebbo, Giga and Game Changers Coalition, product innovations such as the Complementary Feeding Bowl and Oxygen Plant-in-a-Box, and innovative financing mechanisms like the Child-Lens Investing Framework.

Between 2019 and 2024, the total amount spent on innovation was US$400,094,438. After spending US$31,681,240 on innovation in 2019, spending dipped by 24 per cent in 2020, but grew year on year thereafter to reach US$116,322,214 globally in 2024. This was accelerated through two allocations of Set Aside funding in support of innovation piloting and scaling in 2020 and 2021.[18]

In 2024, UNICEF's operational structure included four entities with a mandate to support innovation, operationalised in partnership with the Programme Group (PG, now known as Global Programme Division, GPD).[19] This included the **OoI**, tasked with positioning UNICEF as a leader in public sector innovation for children, steer organizational innovation efforts and governance aligning resources with programmatic priorities and supporting innovation through a portfolio approach; the **Product Innovation Centre** (PIC), which led the research, development and scaling of product innovations through a stage gate process; **Technology for Development** (T4D, a function that sits within Information Communication and Technology Division, now known as Digital Impact Division, DID), an initiative to support digital innovation and integrate it across operations; and the **Innovative Finance Hub** (IF), which explored and developed new partnerships and modalities of innovative finance and fundraising. Annex 1.3 provides further detail.

Innovation was operationalized through UNICEF Country Offices (COs). COs were tasked with fostering an enabling environment, identifying problems for innovation to solve and selecting and implementing innovation projects that leverage UNICEF's core capabilities while managing associated risks.[20] Human Resource (HR) data indicated that eight (6 per cent) of the COs had one staff member dedicated to supporting innovation.

Regional Offices (ROs) were tasked with identifying regional issues where focused innovation efforts could make a meaningful impact. The Accountability Framework described their role to oversee the approval and implementation of priority innovation investments, ensuring that these initiatives are supported through incentives, governance and resources.[21] ROs supported innovation through the T4D function, including the Regional Chiefs of ICT and Business Analysts. These staff provided guidance on digital tools, facilitated learning between COs, and highlighted opportunities to replicate.

Purpose, objectives, and scope

The **purpose** of the evaluation was to provide a credible and independent assessment of UNICEF's 'fit for purpose' to use innovation as a change strategy to achieve transformational organizational outcomes and goals. Combining formative and summative elements, **the evaluation had four objectives:**

- **Objective 1:** To assess the relevance, coherence and sustainability of UNICEF institutional arrangements to integrate innovation as a change strategy;
- **Objective 2:** To examine the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of UNICEF innovation approaches;
- **Objective 3:** Assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of innovation initiatives to enhance programme effectiveness and accelerate positive outcomes for children; and
- **Objective 4:** To identify and analyse the enabling and hindering factors influencing innovation within UNICEF, the generation of new knowledge and thought leadership to influence the innovation ecosystem and promote child rights.

The evaluation assessed achievements to date and provided forward-looking recommendations. This was a global evaluation, covering all seven UNICEF regions, with a focus on the positioning of innovation as a change strategy, including its systems, processes, governance, capacity, resourcing, partnerships and culture. **It is not an evaluation of the OoI, but rather an assessment of UNICEF's organization-wide approach to innovation as a change strategy.** It included innovation initiatives across various Divisions and at different levels. The temporal scope of the evaluation was from 2019 to 2024, encompassing both the management response to the 2019 evaluation of innovation work, implementation of the 2022–2025 Strategic Plan and recent developments leading into 2025.

Innovation at UNICEF involved a wide range of distributed activities and diverse stakeholders at multiple levels. **The primary audiences for the evaluation are internal UNICEF duty bearers:**

- Global level (particularly the GIB, ISC, OoI, SD, DID, GPD, Division of Private Fundraising and Partnerships (PFP), Digital Transformation (Dx) Board and the Procurement Services Review Committee (ProServ));
- Regional level (particularly Regional Programme and Planning Chiefs, Regional Evaluation Advisers, and Regional T4D Specialists); and
- Country levels (particularly CO staff developing innovation strategies, thematic teams involved in portfolio governance, and staff working on specific programmatic innovations).

Secondary audiences include the UNICEF Global Leadership Team, UNICEF National Committees (NatComs), the Executive Board, and other global-level offices responsible for supporting the implementation of recommendations, such as the Division of People and Culture (DPC), the Division of Financial and Administrative Management (DFAM), and the Office of Strategy and Evidence (OSE), following the merger of the former Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring (DAPM) and the Global Office of Research and Foresight (GORAF). Secondary audiences also include external development partners and governments. Rights-holders, as the end users of UNICEF services, are expected to ultimately benefit from the evaluation. Annex 1.3 includes a stakeholder mapping.

The governance of this evaluation ensured robust oversight, expert input and inclusive validation of the findings. The ISC served as the primary Evaluation Reference Group, providing guidance and detailed feedback on the inception report and all major deliverables. An external Advisory Group comprising five experts in innovation management strengthened the relevance of the methodology and findings throughout the process. Regional advisory groups validated case study findings. The overall evaluation findings were validated through iterative discussions with the ISC, the external advisory group and the OoI. A series of recommendation co-creation workshops in September 2025 served to collaboratively shape proposed actionable next steps and aim to ensure broad ownership of the evaluation's conclusions. The evaluation report was finalized in December 2025.

The findings aimed to inform UNICEF's approach to innovation as a change strategy, including internal governance and systems for innovation at the global level. The findings also aimed to inform the management of innovation in regions and countries to achieve rights-based results for children. Interim findings were shared to inform the design of the 2026–2029 Strategic Plan.



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3 Evaluation methodology

Evaluation design and approach

The evaluation methodology was designed to respond to the four evaluation objectives summarised in Section 1.1. The evaluation utilized a participatory, mixed methods, non-experimental design to assess innovation systems, approaches and initiatives at UNICEF against the evaluation criteria of relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability.[22] Twenty-one evaluation questions were developed responding to the objectives, addressing both the technical aspects of innovation and key institutional factors. An evaluation matrix was developed, included in Annex 2.1.1, mapping the evaluation objectives, evaluation questions, assumptions, indicators and data collection and analysis methods.

The design focused on primary qualitative insights collected through key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), triangulated with a comprehensive desk review, secondary data analysis and a quantitative all-staff survey, identifying key themes and patterns across the global, regional, country and initiative levels.

A case study approach explored 16 individual innovation initiatives in greater depth and identified key enabling and hindering factors influencing innovation within UNICEF. Sampling of the initiatives was informed by interviews conducted during the inception phase, which highlighted key innovation efforts in different regions and countries. Sampling ensured representation of initiatives across different approaches, geographies, stage of innovation, type of innovation and thematic focus. The case studies relied on document review, portfolio-level data analysis, and a combination of remote and in-person KIIs and FGDs with internal and external stakeholders.

The evaluation drew upon several established benchmarks and frameworks to evaluate UNICEF's approach to innovation, notably the Innovation Management Standard ISO as detailed in Annex 2.2. The evaluation used the existing OoI Theory of Change (ToC) as an analytical framework across all evaluation questions to understand and explore UNICEF's innovation pathways. In particular, the ToC informed analysis of institutional arrangements (innovation culture and enabling conditions), innovation approaches (ecosystem strengthening), and innovation initiatives (scaling mechanisms and integration). While it provided a coherent structure for examining links between inputs, outputs, and outcomes, the evaluation did not update the ToC.

The ToC was developed for the OoI in 2024 and endorsed by the OoI Innovation Management Team, but it was not widely disseminated beyond the OoI. It was considered as representative of some OoI approaches but less relevant for other innovation approaches. It also contained assumptions, particularly around open-source technology, entrepreneurship, and locally led innovation, that were conceptual and not empirically testable within an evaluation. Accordingly, the ToC was used to guide inquiry and interpretation, yet, in line with the Terms of Reference (ToR), it was not explicitly updated (see Annexes 1.1 and 1.2).

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis was structured into five phases, with the development of a set of key deliverables, including an inception report, an interim institutional assessment report (Objective 1), an interim assessment of approaches report (Objective 2), seven case study reports (Objective 3) and this final evaluation report. Data sources were selected and designed to complement one another, providing depth of insights and enabling the validation of key themes across multiple sources described below. Annex 2 includes addition information on methods.

Document review: Over 500 documents were reviewed to (a) understand the organizational context, history, strategic objectives and operational frameworks, and progress against the recommendations made in the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation and findings from the 2022 Evaluability Assessment and Formative Evaluation of the Strategic Plan, and (b) assess approaches to innovation.

Portfolio analysis: Dashboard data from the OoI Dashboard, Venture Fund Dashboard and INVENT was collated to analyse UNICEF's approaches to innovation, including number of initiatives supported across innovation type, stage and thematic area, alignment to priorities, budget allocation, reach, and outcomes where recorded.

Interviews: 103 KIIs were conducted with 87 UNICEF staff and 16 external stakeholders (50 women and 53 men). At inception, KIIs informed the evaluation design, approach and selection of initiatives for case studies. During the data collection phase, KIIs were used to understand and explore institutional arrangements, governance, culture and innovation approaches. A full list of interviewees is provided in Annex 2.5.

Focus group discussions (FGDs): 13 workshops and FGDs were conducted with 33 UNICEF HQ staff (20 women and 13 men).[23] At inception, workshops explored governance, scaling, product innovation, the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Hub, monitoring and evaluation, and key events for innovation within UNICEF. During the data collection phase, seven FGDs with innovation teams[24] were held to assess UNICEF's approaches to innovation.

Regional thematic case studies: Document review, 104 KIIs and 8 FGDs with 72 UNICEF staff and 88 external partners and right holders (101 women and 59 women) [25] were conducted to explore 16 sampled innovation initiatives and identify key enablers and barriers related to these initiatives. Four initiatives adopted a regional approach, prioritising RO interviews together with 1 –2 CO interviews in 2-3 different countries. The remaining 12 initiatives adopted a country-specific approach, focusing on data collection in one country. Data was collected through both remote interviews and four country visits. Thematic focus areas included types of innovation, as follows:

- Digital, Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA);
- Product, Middle East and North Africa Regional Office (MENA);
- Social and product, West and Central Africa Regional Office (WCARO);
- Data, East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO);
- Stage of innovation and scale, Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO);
- Approaches such as co-creation with young people, Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office (LACRO); and
- Enabling factors such as innovation strategy and culture, Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO).

Staff survey gathered perceptions on innovation governance, management, and culture across UNICEF and identified key themes and differences across Offices and geographies. The survey was voluntary and shared with 11,632 UNICEF staff members directly and indirectly engaged in innovation at HQ, regional, country and field levels. A total of 982 staff (40 per cent women, 53 per cent men, 7 per cent prefer not to say) responded, at a response rate of 8.4 per cent, sufficient for statistical validity. Responses were distributed across 121 countries, all seven regions, and various offices and divisions across functions (responses were not evenly distributed).

A purposive sampling approach was used for all qualitative methods to ensure innovation knowledge and expertise and representation of diverse roles, levels of engagement, geographical representation and inclusion of women and men. The staff survey used a census approach. Table 1 below summarizes stakeholders included in primary data. Further details are in Annex 2.

Table 1. Stakeholders included in primary data sources

Data source		Women	Men	HQ	RO	CO/FO	External	Total
Staff survey		396	516	190	44	740	-	982
Global interviews		50	53	47	20	20	16	**103**
Global FGDs		20	13	33	0	0	0	**33**
Case study interviews and FGDs	EAPR	4	3	0	0	5	2	**7**
	ECAR	28	7	0	4	10	21	**35**
	ESAR	6	5	3	3	5	0	**11**
	LACR	21	9	1	3	9	17	**30**
	MENAR	11	8	6	1	10	2	**19**
	SAR	6	7	0	3	4	6	**13**
	WCAR	25	20	0	0	5	40	**45**
Total		**567**	**641**	**280**	**78**	**808**	**104**	**1,278**

Data analysis and triangulation: Interview and FGD data was transcribed and coded using MaxQDA, using a systematic analytical framework combining deductive and inductive approaches. For survey data, descriptive statistics were applied to individual questions, and index scores were analysed across six key themes. Welch's ANOVA was used to test group differences (e.g., region, job level, gender), and Pearson's r to test cross-theme correlations. Qualitative responses were coded by evaluation question and theme using keyword searches, supported by ClaudeAI.

Gender analysis was conducted using a combination of methods, including: gender disaggregated survey analysis, where Likert-scale responses were collapsed into two categories: agree (including 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses) and not agree (all other responses) and chi-square tests were used to identify statistically significant differences;[26] portfolio analysis of initiative leadership and disaggregated reach data (where available); and analysis of interview data on gender equity and inclusion. The survey sample included sufficient numbers of both men and women to support statistically robust comparisons by gender. However, it did not support more granular disaggregation, such as gender differences within specific office levels or regions. To maintain a succinct report, disaggregated results are not presented where no notable differences were identified between respondents based on gender.

Following separate analysis and coding of quantitative and qualitative data, key themes and findings were compared and contrasted across the different sources. Findings were systematically mapped against evaluation questions to triangulate and cross-verify evidence from different sources and identify emerging patterns, consistencies and contradictions in the data. The resulting mapping was validated through collaborative synthesis workshops by the full evaluation team with the resulting synthesis used to produce a first draft of key findings, conclusions and recommendations. These were presented to key stakeholders, including the OoI and ICG and Advisory Group, through a series of three workshops. Discussion was facilitated by the Evaluation Office, to validate the findings and gather feedback. This feedback informed subsequent development of the findings, conclusions and recommendations.

The final report also underwent a quality assurance review to ensure methodological rigour, clarity and adherence to UNICEF's evaluation standards.

Ethical considerations

The evaluation was guided by a commitment to ethical principles and safeguarding in line with the UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation (2020), UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis (2021), and the ERIC guidance on Ethical Research Involving Children (2013). Ethical principles were embedded and adhered to throughout the evaluation, in alignment with international and UNICEF standards and values.

The evaluation team was selected to ensure expertise in gender equality, inclusion and human rights. The evaluation methodology was designed based on the UNEG Guidance on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluations.

Principles of independence and impartiality were prioritised and guaranteed as per UNEG standards to ensure the credibility of the evaluation. The evaluation team was free from conflicts of interest, and measures were taken to ensure transparency and traceability of evidence within ethical boundaries. Data analysis and triangulation protocols were maintained throughout to uphold accountability, independence and credibility.

The evaluation upheld commitments to confidentiality, informed consent, equitable participation and "Do No Harm" principles. Participants were informed of the context and purpose of the evaluation and their engagement, and any potential implications, with clear communication that participation was voluntary. Information was stored anonymously, encrypted and deleted six months after closure of the assignment. Tools were designed to be culturally sensitive and non-discriminatory, with inclusive and accessible language to support meaningful participation. Efforts were made to achieve a fair and representative selection of participants, ensuring inclusion of women, men, and, where feasible, individuals from specific groups such as persons with disabilities. All instruments underwent ethical review, and team members were trained on safeguarding protocols. Independent Review Board approval was granted by Health Media Lab (UNICEF IRB ID: 2852) for data collection in the field.

Care was taken by the evaluation team to present findings in an accessible format using human rights and gender sensitive language. All reports, including interim deliverables, were assessed against the UN-System Wide Assessment Plan (UN-SWAP) Evaluation Performance Indicator (UN-SWAP EPI).

Limitations and mitigation measures

Several limitations and challenges were encountered during the design phase, data collection and analysis that affect the resulting findings and interpretation. Mitigation strategies were implemented where possible. Disaggregated beneficiary data by gender, age, and disability across the initiatives is not available. Other key limitations and mitigation strategies are described in Table 2.

Table 2. Key limitations and mitigation measures

Limitation	Impact on report and mitigation measures
Timeliness	
UNICEF faced unprecedented changes and restructuring due to global funding cuts, leading to internal decisions about innovation structures and resources before data collection and analysis was complete.	**Preliminary findings from the evaluation were shared with UNICEF management** to inform both the development of the new Strategic Plan and FFI. **Medium- to long-term recommendations were co-designed** to remain relevant and aligned with the new innovation structures introduced following these organizational changes.

Limitation	Impact on report and mitigation measures
Most of UNICEF's innovation structures are relatively new, while research and experiences from the wider sector suggests sustained investment over ten to twenty years is typically required before innovation portfolios and initiatives mature to deliver measurable results at scale.	This timing constrains the ability to assess long-term effectiveness and sustainability. As such, **results and achievements observed to date should be viewed as early signals of progress** or opportunities to pivot, not necessarily end-points, and as part of a broader learning curve.
Data collection	
There was limited documented information on structures and processes, failures, and innovation capacities of COs and ROs is limited, with most documents linked to specific approaches and initiatives.	This was mitigated through data from interviews and FGDs, and targeted requests for additional information where available. As a result, **findings on structures and processes are primarily based on primary qualitative data.**
Comprehensive global-level innovation financial data was limited.	The evaluation team was **unable to fully assess decision-making, resource allocation and outcomes**. All available information was analyzed and triangulated, however findings should be interpreted with caution given these data limitations.
Some IF Hub and UNICORN data was missing. Some data was missing or incomplete in OOI, VF and PIC data dashboards (e.g., incomplete budget data).	Analysis was carried out based on partial and summary data. Statistics were extracted from documents where possible.
Dashboards used to collate information on individual initiatives were inconsistent and there was missing data. Dashboards were managed and updated in different ways and recorded different information. Some initiatives duplicated across dashboards contained conflicting information.	Analysis was carried out separately for each approach, and different insights and levels of detail were available for each. Across all dashboards, there was missing data for some initiatives, **limiting a comprehensive analysis of budget data, reach and results**.
There was limited secondary documentation of outcomes achieved by individual innovation initiatives, reflecting both limited resources and the early stage of some initiatives.	The case studies relied on existing documentation and qualitative input from stakeholders. This **scope limited the ability to fully assess effectiveness where no prior evaluation existed**.
For several case studies, CO staff had limited capacity to engage, and some declined participation. Availability of CO staff was affected by concurrent strategic planning processes and significant organizational restructuring at the country, regional and global levels under the Future Focus Initiative.	In response, a regional approach was developed, prioritizing RO KIIs supplemented by light-touch CO engagement. This led to **variation in case study methodology and depth**, but **enabled broader exploration of country and regional dynamics, enabling factors and challenges**. However, several case studies drew on a small number of interviews (less than 5 per initiative) and therefore represent a light-touch overview, triangulated with documentation, rather than comprehensive and in-depth analysis. Regardless, the purpose of the case studies was to provide insights and lessons learned for the global evaluation, rather than providing standalone evaluations for each region
The staff survey response rate of 8.4 per cent exceeded the target rate and met criteria for significance and comparisons between groups. However, response was voluntary, which might have resulted in a non-response bias, with those who responded likely to be more actively interested in and engaged with innovation efforts.	Survey findings were triangulated with purposively sampled interview data to **minimise bias and ensure the representation of diverse perspectives**.



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4 Evaluation findings

Institutional assessment

This section provides an assessment of the institutional arrangements for innovation at UNICEF organised around evaluation questions 1.1-1.8 under Objective 1. The analysis examined the extent to which UNICEF has established the necessary foundations to support innovation in a consistent, coherent and strategic manner. The section concludes with a summary assessment against three evaluation criteria considered under Objective 1 (relevance, coherence and sustainability), providing a basis for understanding how well institutional arrangements support innovation in pursuit of UNICEF's mandate. A summary of the relevance, coherence and sustainability of UNICEF institutional arrangements is provided in Annex 3.5.

Objective 1: To assess the relevance, coherence and sustainability of UNICEF institutional arrangements to integrate innovation as a change strategy

In summary:

1. In the past five years, substantial advancements have been made in governance, staffing, resources, tools and portfolio management, laying a stronger foundation for innovation across UNICEF.
2. Innovation was formally recognised in the 2018 –2021 and 2022 –25 Strategic Plans, yet the absence of narrowly defined challenge or opportunity areas based on this positioning weakened strategic focus on what to pursue.
3. A new three-tier governance system (GIB, ISC and Thematic Teams) improved cooperation for innovation (the ISC in particular strengthened cooperation and support for innovation), but did not oversee all areas of innovation (e.g., COs, ICTD, IF). While staff awareness of governance structures improved, coordination with other bodies, such as the Dx Board, was weak and many staff found roles and responsibilities unclear.
4. The strongest structures for innovation management were at HQ. Tools like the 5D Innovation Framework and the PIC's Stage Gates improved transparency about investment decisions. The 5D Innovation Framework was adopted by ISC as UNICEF's organizational innovation framework and informed global solutions such as the Learning Passport, but was not yet used by most COs, ROs or by ICTD, now DID.

5. Global innovation investment increased, with significant investments in the acceleration stage (for example, accounting for 60 per cent of documented spend in the OoI dashboard). However, overall, CO-level staff reported limited access to finance.
6. There was no consolidated documentation on how over half of innovation spending was used by COs, ROs, or some HQ entities such as ICTD/DID, which hindered UNICEF's ability to track resources or plan effectively.
7. UNICEF continued to build its reputation for innovation leadership, having been a co-founder of the UNIN, an early signatory to the Principles for Digital Development, a founding partner of the Digital Public Goods Alliance (DPGA). UNICEF sustained these roles, promoted innovation for children and championed the adoption of open-source standards, and influenced the establishment of the Global Digital Compact. Engagement with the private sector also grew, although some partnerships remained underleveraged, with external partners engaged as funders or service providers rather than as co-creators or long-term collaborators.
8. There was significant demand for support and capacity building at the CO-level; most COs faced constraints in staffing and resources, limiting their ability to lead or scale innovation effectively.
9. The fragmentation of digital, data and innovation functions, coupled with unclear distinctions between digital innovation and digital transformation, meant there was a missed opportunity to fully address strategic questions on the opportunities and risks for innovation, as well as confusion over accountabilities.
10. Despite formal efforts to promote risk-taking, deep-rooted risk aversion and limited tolerance for failure stifled bold or disruptive innovation. At the same time, there were insufficient child safeguarding mechanisms, particularly for innovations involving emerging technologies.
11. RO staff, and women across levels, were less positive about the clarity of processes, roles and responsibilities and the availability of technical expertise.


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Overall assessment of changes made since 2019

Positioning innovation as one of nine "change strategies" for developing and scaling up solutions to the most pressing problems facing children in the 2018–2021 and 2022–2025 Strategic Plans reflected the strategic importance of innovation for UNICEF.[27] The change strategies were identified as "key to accelerating progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and realising children's rights".[28] The Strategic Plan intended for innovation to contribute to five long-term goals for UNICEF that were identified as critical to addressing the underlying causes of children's mortality, poverty, vulnerability, gender inequality and exclusion in all settings. Over the past five years, UNICEF significantly increased resources and staffing for innovation at HQ (see Section 3.3).

Since the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation, substantial advances were made in governance, staffing, resources, tools and portfolio management, laying a stronger foundation for innovation across UNICEF. Progress, summarised in Table 3 below, included key achievements of establishing a three-tier governance system, operationalising portfolio management, and engaging different parts of the organization in innovation.

Table 3. Summary of progress made against 2019 Evaluation of Innovation

Recommendation	Progress	Comment
1. Develop a shared strategic vision and approach		
Recognise risk-taking as a necessary component of innovation	🟡	At a strategic level, the OoI integrated an Ambition Matrix to the 5D Innovation framework and value proposition process that sought to ensure up to 20 per cent of investments were in higher risk categories. There was evidence of these tools being used. For example, the WASH landscape assessment applied the Ambition Matrix to provide insights into UNICEF's current innovation investments in order to inform future resourcing decisions. There were examples of staff taking risk across interviews and survey responses. However, overall risk aversion remained widespread, notably among field staff. Failure was under-discussed institutionally, and incentives to support bold experimentation were weak.
How different parts of the organization contribute to innovation	🟢	The Accountability Framework was updated to define roles for innovation across HQ, RO and CO levels. A three-tier governance framework included roles across multiple Divisions, Offices and teams. Joint prioritisation exercises were conducted with PG, UNICEF's Office of Emergencies (EMOPS), OoI, SD, ICTD and the Division of Analysis, Planning, and Monitoring (DAPM). Stronger CO and RO contributions were encouraged. However, challenges remained, especially in relation to staff understanding of innovation roles and responsibilities and tensions with digital transformation efforts (see Section 3.2).
Commit to increased transparency of governance/ oversight and decision-making roles	🟢	Governance structures were formalised in 2020 through a **three-tier governance system** and evolved in 2023 to a GIB, ISC, and Thematic Teams, supported by updated Terms of Reference (ToR) for the GIB and ISC alongside a revised Accountability Framework. Around 50 per cent of staff surveyed for this evaluation said they were familiar with innovation governance structures, compared to low recognition reported in the 2019 evaluation of innovation. Documentation of GIB and ISC meetings improved and included background information and rationales for specific decisions. Awareness of structures improved, with over 50 per cent of staff surveyed for the evaluation reporting familiarity with innovation governance, an increase since 2019.[29] Coordination and mandates between governance bodies (e.g., GIB and Dx Board) were unclear and are discussed in Section 3.2.
More standardised approaches and processes	🟢	More standardised approaches were developed for innovation governance, portfolio management, hubs and innovation modalities. There were particular efforts to systematise the use of portfolio-based approaches. These included the use of the 5D Innovation Framework, Ambition Matrix, Innovation Maturity Model, Innovation MEL Toolbox and the PIC's Stage Gates. Uptake of tools and processes varied across the organization and approaches. The COMPASS initiative[30] provided tailored support to COs to implement these processes, but had only been completed by 10 COs at the time of the evaluation.
Clarity on medium- and long-term staff requirements	🟡	The OoI's Office Management Plan outlined staffing needs for HQ-based functions like Giga and the Venture Fund. Support from strategic donors (such as the Governments of Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland and Spain) allowed better planning for medium-term staff for the OoI. The OoI did not introduce additional innovation roles to ROs or COs, citing concerns over financial sustainability. The roles of regional T4D staff were broadened to incorporate support for innovation. Only eight COs have dedicated innovation roles; many roles were informal or undocumented.

Greater attention to and investment in learning and uptake		Strategic documents emphasised the importance of learning, and outputs like briefs, blogs and events increased. There was investment in knowledge generation activities across OoI and PIC, but evidence generation for specific initiatives was inconsistent, especially on outcomes and failures. There were no system-wide requirements for reporting learning outcomes or uptake results, although OoI developed guidance for learning and PIC had requirements to include learning in the stage-gate review process. Communities of practice were largely informal, although some cross-office learning efforts were emerging at the time of the evaluation.
Periodic review of the strategy		The OoI published a strategy for innovation in UNICEF in 2022[31] and completed a Strategic Moment of Reflection review in 2023, which included an internal audit of the Venture Fund (VF), trends and drivers of change in the external environment and internal context, strategic programme shifts and corporate priorities.[32]
2. Structural change to advance innovation as a means of achieving results for children		
Balance between central and local structures		A few COs created local governance and coordination mechanisms for innovation, but these were the exception at the time of the evaluation. COMPASS aimed to support COs in developing innovation strategies and structures but only 10 COs had completed it at the time of the evaluation. Many COs expressed interest in building stronger locally adapted innovation ecosystems.
Establishing a senior management role at the Deputy Executive Director level		A Deputy Executive Director (DED) role for Innovation and Field Results was established. However, in a subsequent restructure the role was removed and the OoI moved to sit under Programmes. DED Programme chairs the GIB and the OoI responsibilities sit just below DED level whilst other HQ Division supporting different types of Innovation were distributed across other DED Portfolios – T4Ds under DED Management, Product Innovation Team under DED Humanitarian and Supply; Innovative Finance under DED Partnerships. No DED oversaw the full breadth of UNICEF's innovation agenda across digital, data, product, finance and social innovation domains.
Innovation Enabling Services teams should be created		The OoI Portfolio, Culture, and Scale team included staff playing 'enabling services' roles that included portfolio management and supporting COs. The roles worked with the standardised processes (see row on more standardised approaches and processes above). The reach of these roles was limited, and many COs did not receive direct support.
Leadership for digital innovation should be housed under the ICTD		Strategic leadership for innovation sat with the OoI. The Accountability Framework assigned guidance on digital innovation to ICTD but did not fully clarify the relationship vis-à-vis proposed leadership on digital innovation. Many digital innovations were interdisciplinary. The delineation of roles between ICTD and OoI was an ongoing tension at the time of the evaluation according to many interviewees.
Dedicated innovation staff in COs/ROs		HR records indicated that only eight COs had a dedicated innovation role, and there was minimal documentation on roles, responsibilities or effectiveness of innovation staff in ROs and COs (see "local structures" above).

3. Utilize a portfolio management approach		
Implementing a portfolio approach	●	The OoI and PIC both developed portfolio management approaches. The OoI developed a series of documents on Who, How and When the portfolio approach is used, along with a working manual. It updated/developed processes to support the use of the portfolio approach including an ambition matrix, 5D Innovation Framework and value proposition process. For COs, the COMPASS initiative offered guidance on adapting portfolio management for COs. The OoI Key Results in 2024 reported that the portfolio approach had multiplied results, with five of nine portfolios having already scaled at least one initiative to reach over 1 million people. The PIC portfolio management approach was longer-established and emphasised a robust stage-gate model to manage the innovation lifecycle, and processes for procurement, managing suppliers, and assessing demand. Over 90 product innovations were added to the UNICEF supply catalogue.

Source: Document review. ● Good progress; ● some progress; ● no progress; ● Reversed

Governance, structures, roles and responsibilities

Governance

Meaningful progress was made on both of the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation[33] governance-related recommendations. The first was the establishment of a strong governance structure to support risk-taking, which led to the 2020 Global Innovation Strategy and Framework 2.0[34] and, more recently, to the creation of a three-tiered governance system designed collaboratively with the PG in 2023 comprising a GIB, ISC, and Thematic Teams[35] (see Annex 3.2). Additional structures and ad hoc mechanisms, such as the joint governance with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) for Giga[36],[37] further support innovation oversight. Second, in response to calls for increased transparency, UNICEF updated its Accountability Framework, formalised governance roles through ToRs, published annual portfolio summaries, and made all global governance meeting notes, decisions and materials accessable on an open SharePoint site. At the country level, governance remains less developed, with only a handful of the COs interviewed reporting relevant structures, though 10 COs have developed governance guidance through the COMPASS course.[38] Several COs reported improved innovation governance in COs after COMPASS training.

Innovation is firmly established as a strategic priority at UNICEF, recognised in both the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan and the 2022-2025 Strategic Plan. The 2022–2025 Strategic Plan positioned innovation as a change strategy while the 2020 Global Innovation Strategy and Framework 2.0[39] offered useful conceptual foundations for innovation, innovation pathways and scale, which aimed to create a common language and methodology for the organization. However, while this positioning reflected strong institutional commitment and a broad intention to address "intractable problems, stagnating progress, and stubborn barriers" in the lives of children and young people, the absence of more narrowly defined priorities in subsequent processes and documentation diluted focus (discussed in Section 4.1).

Overall, awareness of governance structures improved significantly since 2019; just over half of survey respondents said they were familiar with governance structures in place to support innovation. Surveyed men felt more confident in their awareness of UNICEF's governance structures for innovation (60 per cent, compared to 49 per cent women, a significant difference). This could reflect communication barriers, despite good representation of women in innovation governance and management overall. Interview participants were most familiar with CO structures (where they existed) and the ISC, which was seen as an effective space for facilitating dialogue, collecting feedback and integrating perspectives across the organization. ISC members spoke positively about both the selection process for members and the inclusive tone, which brings together staff from various divisions and levels and has helped create a participatory environment for shaping innovation priorities and processes.

Governance structures did not define priorities or resource allocation for innovation. The GIB was high-level and drew on a range of individuals in relevant roles but had only met three times at the time of the evaluation. Several members of the board were unclear about their mandate, role in resource allocation, and on how their Board should coordinate with the ISC and the Dx Board. While the GIB reportedly discussed prioritization of specific sectors, the minutes do not show discussions on specific problem areas or how to prioritise resources across sectors.

Participants emphasised the need to strengthen strategic alignment between the GIB and other governance bodies, including the Dx Board. They reported growing complexity of digital/data innovations and unclear integration with adjacent governance structures. This was recognised as a priority during the May 2024 GIB meeting, and efforts to clarify roles and responsibilities were requested by the GIB. During interviews, several participants suggested that closer integration (or even consolidation) of governance structures for digital, data and innovation could support more unified strategic direction, especially around UNICEF's technology infrastructure, data and investments. Other interviewees said that the growing volume of committees and processes has been resource-intensive and that a lighter, outcomes-oriented governance model could improve efficiencies.



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Structures, roles and responsibilities

While progress was made on all three recommendations related to structures, role and responsibilities in the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation, results were mixed. The survey, interview, and case study data reveal that ambiguity around roles and a lack of coherence between different innovation structures remained persistent challenges. Although structures had matured, UNICEF's innovation architecture is still not fully integrated with Cos, which is a shared challenge for innovation structures in UN entities. Anticipated organizational changes following the FFI present risks to UNICEF's capacities to experiment and scale up new solutions.

UNICEF's structures play a pivotal role in supporting innovations to scale. From 2019 to 2024, the OoI supported over 180 initiatives through the Venture Fund, Portfolios, SPARK and Hubs. Since inception (2014), it has supported over 230 initiatives, which together have directly reached 38 million people.[40] PIC has invested in 30 new products since 2019[41] and has added 92 products to the supply catalogue since it started in 2011, representing US$252 million in orders. Innovations achievements have been shared via UNICEF Executive Director's annual reports to the Economic and Social Council.[42,43,44,45]

UNICEF made progress in clarifying how different parts of the organization contribute to innovation, however, staff remained unclear on the delineation of roles. UNICEF updated its Accountability Framework to define roles across COs, ROs, and HQ divisions, responding to the recommendation to clarify how different parts of the organization contribute to innovation (summarised in Annex 1.3). Yet in the survey, only 24 per cent of staff agreed they had a good understanding of the delineation of roles between OoI and other offices or divisions (30 per cent of men and 16 per cent of women, a significant difference), and 61 per cent did not report a good understanding of the roles and responsibilities for innovation for their own office or division (41 per cent of men and 29 per cent of women, a significant difference).[46] The difference between men and women's perspectives was significant, consistent with external research identifying structural gender disparities that can affect women's participation in innovation.[47]

The roles outlined in the accountability framework were most ambiguous for ROs. Again, this was also reflected in the survey data, where 73 per cent of RO respondents disagreed that they had a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities for

innovation – the highest level of uncertainty among different office levels. Qualitative feedback suggested RO staff often perceived global innovation processes as bypassing them, limiting their ability to contribute meaningfully to innovation within their region.

Structures for digital innovation

The 2019 Evaluation of Innovation highlighted persistent ambiguity between innovation and digital transformation. During the 2010s, ICTD (now DID) had supported T4D roles in the ROs, and the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation[48] coincided with ICTD playing a growing role in supporting programmes in many settings and launching digital transformation efforts under a separate change strategy. Confusion about digital innovation versus digital transformation was creating uncertainty over whether UNICEF should prioritize scaling existing, proven technologies or developing new, experimental solutions. The evaluation recommended assigning leadership for digital innovation under ICTD to improve coherence. It recommended portfolio management, as a way to balance both priorities and manage risk.

There was no progress against the recommendation to relocate digital innovation; responsibilities for digital/data innovations were complicated and often shared between ICTD (now DID), DAPM (OSE), the OoI, and PG (GPD). There were several reasons for this. First, innovation and Digital Transformation are not interchangeable and do not succeed with the same processes and methodologies. Second, the number of innovations involving data has increased since 2019 and many initiatives now included a digital and data component as part of broader social or product innovation. In addition, some areas of digital work, such as Digital Health, sat within the PG (GPD) and responsibilities for digital protection were also complex and diffused. Third, governance structures and resourcing for innovation and digital transformation were separate, and ICTD (DID) was situated within the management cone at the global level, and operations at the regional or country levels. Although a delineation of roles for ICTD (now DID) and OoI was described in the Accountability Framework and reviewed in a 2024 workshop in Valencia, the clarification of roles and responsibilities was an area of ongoing tension and interview participants lacked consensus around the best structures for supporting digital innovation.

During the evaluation period, there was ongoing ambiguity about digital innovation and digital transformation, and grey areas where initiatives were categorized as both, depending on the person asked. The 2022–2025 Strategic Plan defines them as distinct but interconnected change strategies, recognising that both are needed. Ongoing ambiguity underscored the need for clearer governance and delineation between innovation and digital transformation to ensure that UNICEF's digital efforts are strategically coherent and mutually reinforcing.

These structural challenges for the digital, data and innovation functions did not allow UNICEF to fully and systematically address strategic priorities and created operational challenges. There were relatively few joint initiatives between the OoI, ICTD (DID), and DAPM (OSE), although recent work on Artificial Intelligence (AI) was a notable example.[49] Interviewees suggested joint missions, aligned tools and processes, and better leveraging of HR infrastructure (such as the regional data focal points) to improve coordination. COs implementing innovations also experienced operational frictions; for example, one CO coordinated with the RO, OoI, DAPM (OSE) and ICTD (DID) to implement a digital innovation, with funding, partnerships support, advice and technical support coming from different focal points in different entities, and coordination led by the CO. In a second example, a CO described a significant technology platform launched without clarity on ongoing responsibilities for funding, technical support or governance.

Resolving these structural tensions should be a priority. Both are needed, with their distinct focuses, technical capabilities and methodologies. Digital transformation, led primarily by ICTD (DID), should be adequately resourced and should focus on mainstreaming tried and tested technologies to strengthen organizational systems and efficiency. Innovation should focus on the earlier stages of exploration, Acceleration, and Transition to Scale, including providing support on business model development. ICTD's (DID) role should not extend to managing or directing all digital innovation initiatives, which remain the responsibility of innovation approaches and teams working in close coordination with ICTD (DID) to ensure alignment with digital architecture and data protection standards.

Decentralised structures for innovation

There was some progress on the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation recommendation that any structural adjustments should balance central and local innovation structures.[50] UNICEF invested significantly in global structures to support innovation at scale, while also taking steps foster local innovative structures, including through the COMPASS tool, course and mentorship, designed to support COs to develop their own innovation structures (10 COs had completed the course at the time of this evaluation). The OoI made a strategic decision **not to establish dedicated regional innovation positions,** which was considered financially unsustainable, and instead broadened the roles of existing T4D staff to serve as **regional focal points for innovation**, supported by innovation governance committees chaired by Deputy Regional Directors and secretariats anchored in ICTD (DID) and T4D teams. While this model represented a pragmatic response to financial and structural constraints, **roles and responsibilities were not consistently defined or operationalized**, limiting its effectiveness. Some COs nevertheless significantly in innovation locally, including by developing committees, staff, resources and technical capacities. Others had no bespoke structures but described a rich culture of innovation within their normal ways of working. Despite these successes through informal mechanisms, the majority expressed interest in strengthening local governance and institutional capacities for innovation.

Literature on innovation management underscores this structural dilemma between centralised and locally driven innovation. Effective innovation structures must support both exploration (e.g. pilots and high-risk ideas) and implementation (e.g., scaling and integration into existing systems); this can require 'ambidextrous' structures that operate differently from core operations.[51],[52] Research indicates that UN agencies have faced particular challenges scaling innovations across vastly different contexts without imposing rigid templates.[53] This requires them to create enabling structures that allow coordination across sectors and levels while allowing innovations to be adaptable to specific contexts,[5455] partnerships, institutions and regulatory frameworks.[56]

At the time of writing, the innovation function is expected to undergo a major structural transition, with the PIC closing and the OoI moving into the PG (now GPD). UNICEF's innovation capacity will shift from **operating as a stand-alone capability to becoming more embedded within core structures**. The new positioning may strengthen alignment with core priorities and mandate and improve scaling of successful initiatives. Yet it also risks losing some of the distinctive capacities that enable innovation to thrive: curiosity, experimentation, and tolerance for uncertainty. Experience from across the sector shows that when innovation becomes absorbed into programmatic divisions, organizations often lose creative momentum, divert innovation funding to other programmatic needs, and lower the appetite for risk-taking that drives transformative change. UNICEF will now need to focus on how to mitigate the known weaknesses of integration to prevent innovation from becoming fully subsumed by 'business as usual' programme delivery.

Coordination and informal structures

While coordination was recognised as essential for effective innovation, formal coordination mechanisms across UNICEF's innovation ecosystem were still emerging. Important platforms for coordination included the ISC, some joint activities on AI, and initiative-specific activities. Several ROs also played a role in coordinating innovation thinking between COs. However, overall, these mechanisms were not sufficient to ensure strategic alignment, knowledge exchange, or learning across UNICEF as there were few opportunities for meetings or groups to bridge the structures, offices and teams. These coordination challenges result from global innovation structures holding resources and expertise, while COs tasked with contextual implementation lacked staff capacity and formal accountability for innovation delivery. Only a quarter of staff (26 per cent) agreed that innovation efforts were well coordinated across different levels (31 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women, a significant difference).

Innovation managers had to work closely with mainstream structures across legal, supply and programmes. As noted in the literature, traditional systems favour predictability and risk-aversion, making them poorly suited to the "messiness" of innovation".[57],[58] Promising examples of workarounds were identified, which could benefit the broader organization. The OoI's Nodes work with the Legal Office to create templates for intellectual property is one such example. The PIC experimented with different procurement arrangements for innovation, including performance-based contracts and co-development models with suppliers. The Venture Fund developed

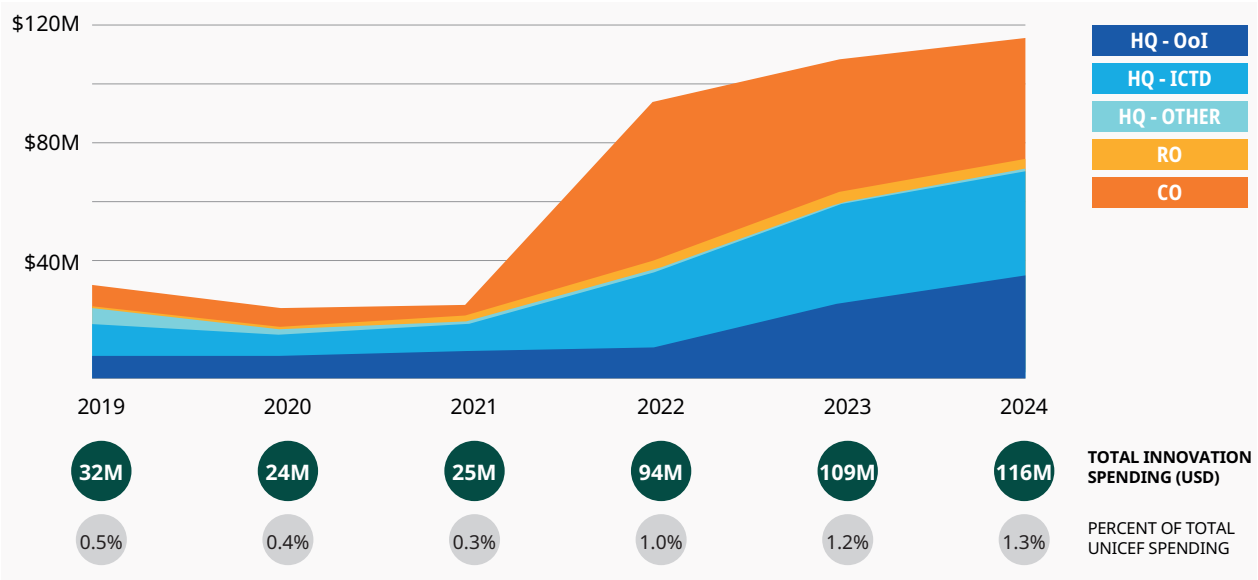
novel partnership approaches, including non-dilutive funding models and voluntary contribution schemes that could potentially inform other innovation contracting strategies. While these mechanisms are formally replicable, their uptake across the organization as innovation-friendly "repeatable processes"[59,60] within existing systems has been limited.

Resource allocation and partnerships

Resource allocation

Global innovation funding grew significantly from 2019 to 2024, with support from governments, including Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Spain and Norway, private sector donors and philanthropists. The OoI relocated to Stockholm in 2021, and global innovation hubs were established in Helsinki, Copenhagen, Geneva and Barcelona with an aim to leverage multi-annual partnerships with hosting member states, and to engage and benefit from their respective academic and innovation ecosystems and political support. The new partnership modality with member states led to significant growth in the number of innovation initiatives that were centrally supported and deployed with a wider range of partners. Interviewees reported close relationships with donors regarding innovations and an enthusiasm to invest in new solutions.[61] This flexible funding was primarily allocated to global-level innovation priorities[62] with a focus on building portfolios (and eventually Hubs) to support scaling. As in the wider sector,[63] most funding came from a relatively small number of donors. There were also funds from private sector sources, for example, for Giga, the Crypto Fund, Venture Fund and IF Hub. Comparator analysis revealed varying levels of private sector integration across UN agencies, with World Food Programme (WFP) leading in systematic private sector funding capture at 22 per cent of total innovation funding in 2023.[64]

Figure 2. Innovation spending at UNICEF 2019 –2024



Source: Generic Intervention Code (GIC) and Specific Intervention Code (SIC) for innovation, VISION

Flexible donor contributions enabled the establishment of dedicated innovation offices and facilitated valuable partnerships with Nordic governments and private sector actors. The funding model and the current openness of donors to innovation enabled freedom in setting priorities and selecting initiatives. There were varying internal views on whether core innovation capacities should be situated closer to programme delivery. Some interviewees said the decision to situate offices in donor capitals placed donor priorities ahead of innovation capacities and proximity to UNICEF's operations; others reasoned that this positioning reflected UNICEF's HQ model at the time and allowed effective partnership-building with innovation donors. Going forward, the key consideration will be ensuring that innovation functions maintain stronger linkages with COs and other parts of the organization.

Annual spending increased more than threefold from US$32 million in 2019 to US$116 million in 2024, indicating a strong upward trend (see Figure 2). The largest year-on-year increase occurred between 2021 (US$25 million) and 2022 (US$94 million), when there was a significant increase in innovation efforts, coinciding with new funding from several Nordic countries. Annex 3.4 includes a full summary of innovation spending based on available data.

At 1.4 per cent of UNICEF's 2024 expenditure,[65] spending on innovation represented a higher share than most other organizations in the sector but was low in comparison to other sectors. Data is limited, but average spending on research and innovation (R&I) in the humanitarian sector was estimated at 0.2 per cent, which is figure that itself lags behind most industries.[66] For example, in 2024, the pharmaceutical sector led in R&D spending at 19 per cent, followed by Software and ICT services with 14 per cent, ICT hardware at 8 per cent, Automobiles at 5 per cent, and other industries at 2 to 4 per cent.[67]

A major challenge in understanding UNICEF's innovation investment was the absence of consolidated data on how funds were used. Approximately 35 per cent of innovation spending in 2024 was linked to activities supported through the OoI (SIC spending), including Giga, the innovation Portfolios and Hubs (see Section 4 for further details) but there was little visibility over the remaining 65 per cent. There was no portfolio data on the innovation spending from ICTD (DID), and the INVENT database did not record reliable budget data. Moreover, as noted in the 2022 Evaluability Assessment and Formative Evaluation of the UNICEF positioning to achieve the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025 (referred hereafter as the EAFE of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025) innovation did not have its own budget line.[68] Staff were able to choose only one GIC and one SIC[69] in the VISION system, which might have resulted in prioritising sectoral or delivery-focused codes over innovation. Without the ability to tag activities with multiple codes or use a cross-cutting identifier, spending related to innovation was likely under-represented in official CO figures.

CO expenditure on innovation was variable. Only 57 per cent of COs reported innovation expenditure in 2024. Among COs that did report innovation expenditure, median expenditure was just US$101,833. Twenty-five COs had expenditure linked to the SIC spending[70] with median expenditure even lower at just US$46,000. Nine COs[71] recorded total spending of greater than US$1 million, including countries in ECAR, ESAR, MENAR and WCAR. Average spending per CO was highest in MENAR and WCAR.

There was significant investment in scaling in comparison to similar agencies. The prevalence of 'pilots' among UN agencies and NGOs has been well-documented.[72] For example, an analysis of eight humanitarian innovation funds found only 9 per cent of funds were allocated for scaling innovations[73],[74]. By comparison, budget data logged in the OoI Portfolio dashboard (including WASH Hub initiatives) indicated 60 per cent of US$39 million (of initiatives with budget and innovation stage data) was allocated to initiatives at Acceleration stage, and 14 per cent to Transition to Scale. Outside these portfolios, significant additional investments have been made in supporting the scale of initiatives such as Giga, Oxygen Plant in a Box, and the Learning Passport (discussed further in Section 7.1.6).

Nevertheless, funding remained the most widely reported barrier to innovation. Only 23 per cent of staff agreed that UNICEF committed enough funds for innovation (18 per cent of women and 28 per cent of men, a significant difference). Almost half (48 per cent) of staff named lack of funding as the main barrier to innovation in their office (48 per cent of women and 48 per cent of men).

Reviewers of this evaluation raised an important question: will staff ever feel there is "enough" funding for innovation, and how should "enough" be defined in the context of high ambition, uncertain processes and a constrained funding environment? Nevertheless, data indicated that access to funding was very variable. Only 19 per cent of CO staff agreed that funding for innovation was easily accessible. This dropped to 6 per cent among staff with disabilities and was also lower among women (16 per cent, compared to 21 per cent of men). The EAFE of the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 agreed that innovation funding remained difficult to access at the country level, resulting in over-reliance on programmatic resources to fund innovation.[75] Without specific innovation funds, CO innovation expenditure was heavily dependent on CO leadership, host government support, and possible pathways for sustainability (see Section 6). Staff involved in innovation approaches consistently stated that scaling was resource-intensive and that clear prioritisation, selective investment, and funding for scale were needed. Several internal and external interviewees noted this was particularly true for product innovations.

Partners and suppliers

The OoI, PIC and ICTD cultivated relationships with academic institutions, technical partners and vendors. Annex 3.3 includes a summary of key partners. The Innovation Hubs and flagship initiatives (e.g., Nodes, Giga, Sustainable WASH Hub) also enhanced UNICEF's reputation as a convener of innovation partnerships. For example, Giga partnered with Ericsson to map school connectivity in 35 countries. The ability to forge global-level partnerships benefited UNICEF's reputation and convening power. **Within the UN system, UNICEF played a leading role in innovation.** UNICEF co-chaired the UNIN and played an active role with WFP in fostering innovation across the UN system, including hosting an innovation leads retreat in 2024 and sharing its tools and frameworks. It was also an active collaborator in the International Development Innovation Alliance (IDIA) platform for innovation leads and a signatory to the principles for digital development. These networks fostered knowledge sharing, peer exchange and learning, but did not lead to systematic ways for co-developing, adopting or scaling of innovation entities between different UN entities.

UNICEF's academic partnerships, particularly those emerging through the OoI's Nodes initiative, represented a promising but nascent approach to expanding technical expertise. These collaborations were relatively recent and often informal, involving students and researchers working on topics such as future technologies. Discussions with partners explored technology transfer mechanisms and how academic research might be adapted for use in underserved markets. The collaborations were used to co-produce a range of knowledge outputs. Over eleven months, the Nodes team worked with nine divisions and the Legal Office to develop contract templates for intellectual property and pro bono work, investing significant time to ensure they could be used consistently and appropriately by other UNICEF teams in future. The resulting templates, along with Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and guidance, were available on the Legal Office's SharePoint.

There was a significant divide in perceptions of UNICEF's external partnerships, with contrasting experiences reported by different types of stakeholders. Sector partners such as other UN agencies and donor coordination groups described relationships with UNICEF's innovation teams very positively. These actors appreciated the organization's brand strength and valued the contribution of charismatic, high-level spokespeople. In contrast, several **private sector partners and implementing partners expressed frustration**. In particular, more mature innovation partners expected more strategic and technical collaboration beyond funding roles, greater engagement with UNICEF's regional and local teams and higher visibility of discussions on results and challenges.

Private sector partnerships were valued at the CO level. Nearly half of CO and Field Office (FO) staff surveyed (48 per cent) felt partnerships made UNICEF's innovation efforts more effective, compared to 30 per cent of RO staff. Despite this, CO engagement with private sector partners was limited and uneven. While some COs were able to work with new or local private sector actors, most continued to partner with the same actors engaged through traditional programming (e.g., NGOs, Civil Society Organizations (CSO), government). Procurement and contracting processes (discussed further in section 6.3.7) and limited existing relationships were cited as key barriers to broader private sector engagement. Several COs emphasised the need for a greater role for innovation entities in HQ to support links with global partners.

National host governments were a critical partner for co-creation, sustainability and scaling for many innovation initiatives. Some COs said governments regularly looked to UNICEF COs to suggest, pilot and assess new (often digital) solutions, with UNICEF taking on the possible reputational risk of early-stage failure. In these COs, UNICEF's ability to test and learn from solutions was described as a 'value add' to the host government. However, in other settings, the top-down nature of some digital solutions was described as a significant challenge for work with host governments. One ECAR CO, for example, spent two years securing early-stage involvement with the Ministry of Health before a significant investment was made into the U-Support app. Initially driven by the RO, the CO felt that managing HQ, RO and government engagement in the process was challenging but ultimately essential for sustainability and planning the eventual handover.

Systems and processes

Working with the PG, the OoI took significant steps to systematise the use of a portfolio-based approach. A core recommendation of the 2019 evaluation of innovation was to establish a portfolio management and prioritisation approach "as well as development and provision of frameworks, tools and processes, monitoring, evaluation, knowledge-sharing, learning and feedback."[76] To this end, the OoI and the PG took several steps including a joint prioritisation exercise,[77] portfolio review process, a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) for portfolio governance,[78] an External Landscape Assessment,[79] the development of the 5D Innovation Framework[80] for assessing initiatives with a portfolio and an Ambition Matrix to help portfolio managers balance risk and impact.[81] In addition to these systems, the OoI also issued guidance on standard indicators for Innovation linked to the strategic plan and for financial tracking of innovation in VISION, helping to align management and reporting processes across the organization.

At the time of this evaluation, these systems were still maturing, and tools and processes were still being embedded in approaches and COs. Significant progress has been made in sharing the 5D Innovation Framework in recent months, and it has informed decision-making around some initiatives, such as the Learning Passport. A key finding, detailed in Sections 4, 5 and 6, was the weaknesses in systems for knowledge management and learning. While existing evaluation evidence was rich, few initiatives benefited from robust evaluation, and processes for capturing and disseminating learning on both successes and failures was lacking, as exemplified in the case study initiative reviews. A small number of staff benefited from informal learning spaces that enabled open dialogue and peer exchange either within UNICEF (e.g., the COMPASS cohorts) or beyond (e.g., through UNIN).

The data also emphasised the need for stronger processes for selecting innovations to support at different stages. UNICEF's priorities for innovation were broad, and the role of selecting between different priorities (such as reducing costs, increasing reach or addressing gaps in equity) or solutions largely sat with leaders of innovation approaches, portfolio managers, and CO leadership. About one-third of survey respondents (34 per cent) agreed that there was a transparent process in place for selecting and prioritising innovation initiatives, but this was notably lower among RO (16 per cent) and HQ staff (20 per cent). It was also lower among women (30 per cent, compared to 39 per cent of men, a significant difference). Several survey respondents shared that portfolio management decisions were sometimes driven by individuals rather than formal and consistent processes and robust evaluation and evidence-based decision-making had not been clearly systematised or prioritised.

UNICEF's systems and processes are designed to build for scale, and many interviewees agreed that scaling successful solutions is the most effective way to maximise impact for children. Some recent literature and commentators have questioned the dominance of scale as the ultimate goal of innovation. While scalability has long been valued as a marker of efficiency, value for money, and systemic impact, critics argue that this pursuit can erode the very qualities that make innovation meaningful: local and cultural variation, adaptation and and sustainability. Emerging perspectives call for a rebalancing of priorities: investing not only in scalable innovations but also in those that strengthen local systems, build capacities, and generate non-scalable forms of value such as social cohesion, dignity, and antifragility. For UNICEF, this debate highlights the importance of balancing its ambition for global scale with a renewed emphasis on locally led, context-driven innovation. Across many initiatives, there were clear efforts to adapt innovations to local contexts, though this process often faced challenges related to capacity, ownership, and alignment with national systems, as discussed throughout this report. UNICEF's approach should continue to recognise that smaller, adaptive, and community-owned solutions may generate deeper and more enduring impacts than those simply replicated globally.



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People and culture

UNICEF lacks a clear and comprehensive staffing structure for innovation, with limited visibility of capacity across offices and unclear career pathways for innovation roles. UNICEF specified medium-term staff requirements through the OoI's Office Management Plan[82] and leveraged strategic donor funding to support staff in initiatives like Giga and the Venture Fund. However, there was no comprehensive picture of innovation capacity across COs and ROs. Dedicated teams for supporting innovation were established in the OoI, and new T4D roles were created in HQ and ROs. Career pathways remained unclear, with 37 per cent of staff reporting the absence of clear advancement routes for innovation roles.

UNICEF staff has uneven access to innovation expertise and technical capacity. Fewer than half of surveyed staff (42 per cent) said that UNICEF had the right skills at HQ to support innovation. The proportion was lower when asked about expertise at the CO and RO level (35 and 36 per cent, respectively). Women were less positive than men in all areas related to technical capacity. For example, 27 per cent of women said there were the right skills at the CO level, compared to 42 per cent of men, a significant difference. In interviews, staff described limited access to expertise on digital innovation, procurement of new technologies, and navigating UNICEF processes. Staff also identified gaps in ethical oversight for innovations involving emerging technologies and felt UNICEF did not have sufficient technical expertise to discuss innovation and innovation safeguards with Government counterparts. These gaps were triangulated by findings from the EAFE of the Strategic Plan 2022–2025, which found the technical capacities for innovation insufficiently ready to support the implementation of the Strategic Plan.[83] The UNICEF Global Innovation Strategy and Framework 2.0 also identified important areas for capacity-building, including business modelling, deployment expertise, partnering and project management.

Risk taking

UNICEF's innovation investments demonstrate a willingness to take risks to improve outcomes for children, and there was some progress in establishing practices and processes for risk taking. The ISO 56002 Innovation Management Standard emphasises that mature innovation systems balance ambition with structured risk management and deliberate learning mechanisms. In line with this, UNICEF's 5D Innovation Framework recognised risk as a core component of the innovation process and distinguished four key risk types: financial, reputational, capacity-related, and risks of harm. However, while the framework established a sound conceptual basis, the practical tools and guidance to help teams systematically identify, assess, and mitigate these risks were underdeveloped. Strengthening this area would help UNICEF move from ad hoc risk handling toward a more deliberate, organization-wide culture of informed and balanced risk-taking for innovation.

While 46 per cent of staff felt supported to adapt to changing needs and 55 per cent said new ways of thinking were encouraged, only 26 per cent of staff reported a high tolerance for risk-taking in their office, and only 28 per cent said failure was welcomed as a learning opportunity. These findings mirror those of the recent Evaluation of Human Resources Management (HRM) in UNICEF (2025), which found that 55 per cent of survey respondents described the organization as risk-averse and only 16 per cent described it as comfortable with risk. The HRM evaluation concluded that hierarchical and risk-averse organizational traits limit innovation and collaboration. Similarly, the EAFE of the Strategic Plan 2022–2025, found that although innovation was widely recognised as an organizational strength, a culture of risk-taking and acceptance of failure remained limited.[84] These figures have not improved since 2018, when 56 per cent of Global Staff Survey respondents agreed that new ideas were supported.[85]

UNICEF's organizational culture shapes the approach to risk taking. The recent Evaluation of HRM in UNICEF and 'cultural thumbprint' summary found that UNICEF's 'mission-driven' and 'aiming-high' traits fostered deep commitment, pride, and responsiveness and staff were motivated by a strong sense of purpose and integrity.[86] However, these same traits, along with the attribute of 'make progress in the right way', could also make staff cautious about taking risks that might compromise quality, accountability, or the organization's public reputation.

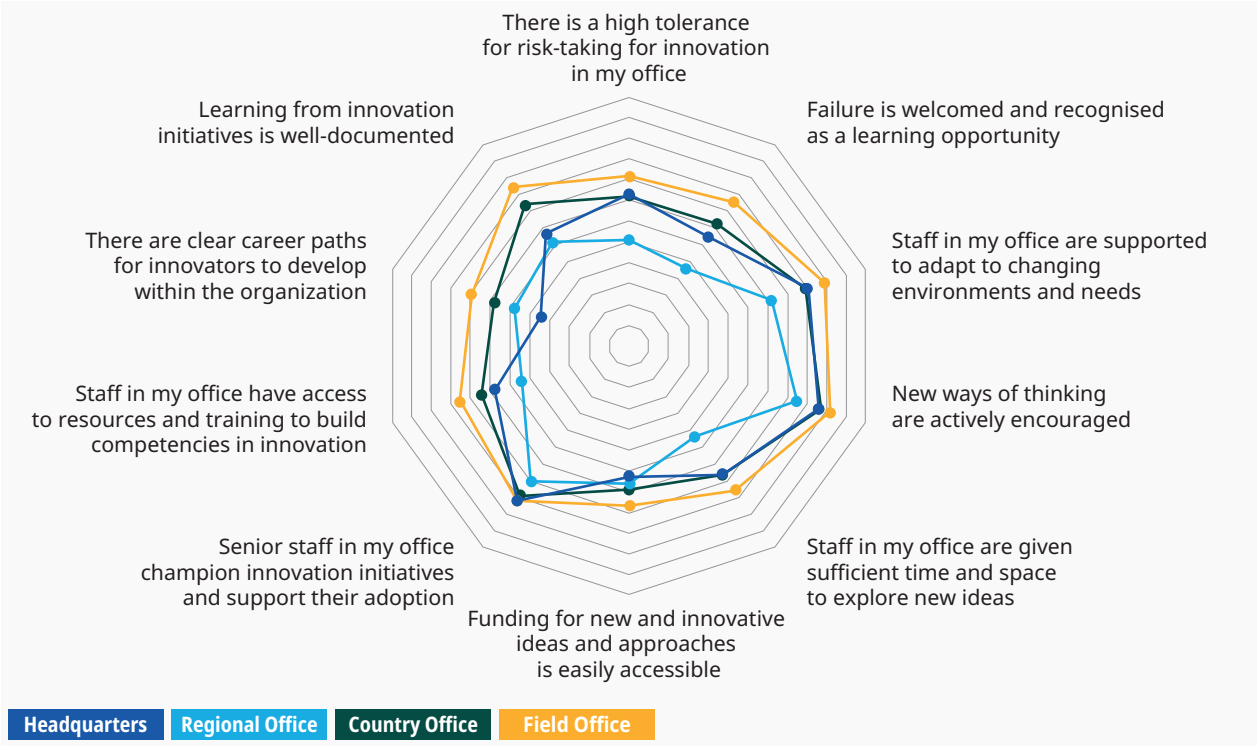
Interviewees agreed that in some cases an emphasis on delivery led to a reluctance to acknowledge failure (see Section 4.4.2) and that performance management offered few incentives for calculated risk-taking. At the same time, CO Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (PME) teams are rarely mandated or resourced to learn from failed or discontinued innovations, making it difficult to normalise adaptive decision-making. One staff survey respondent summarised the general view, "The current structures and systems foster innovation.

However, we have a strong culture of 'playing it safe' that hinders taking innovation to next level. It is like having one foot on the accelerator and one foot on the brake at the same time."

Risk taking for innovation varied considerably across UNICEF offices and types of risk. Figure 3 illustrates staff perspectives on the culture for risk taking in their offices, which were generally more positive at FO and CO level compared to RO and HQ with notable gaps across cultural elements.

Interviews further indicated that offices with larger humanitarian budgets, strong leadership support, or leaders with prior experience in technology and adaptive approaches were generally more open to taking financial and reputational risks. Views were mixed on the effectiveness of innovation 'guardrails': several interviewees noted that capacity and safeguarding risks were under-assessed or insufficiently mitigated, and case studies, observations and interview data found innovation teams lacked practical tools to identify and manage these risks consistently.

Figure 3. Staff perspectives on different elements of a culture of innovation in their office



Source: Staff survey. Percentage of staff who selected each factor in the survey.

A 'honeymoon effect' was observed among newer staff, who reported more positive perceptions on innovation culture. Interview responses suggested that positivity among newer staff reflected that, while new ideas were generally encouraged, over time, staff come up against barriers such as organizational structures, limited time and resources, and low risk appetite, which created barriers to developing and scaling ideas. Several reviewers of this evaluation reasoned that this effect would only be countered through stronger evidence that demonstrates the value of innovation and closes the feedback loop. It was also observed that staff in junior positions had more positive perceptions than senior staff.

The survey index analysis[87] indicated the interconnected and reinforcing nature of different aspects of institutional arrangements. This was evidenced by a notable correlation between scores across the different themes of the survey (governance, resourcing, culture, etc.). It also indicated that staff had generally consistent perspectives across these different areas - either largely positive, neutral or negative. In some offices, there were clearer processes, support mechanisms and success stories. WCAR stood out as a positive example, with a positive innovation culture reported by staff in Cameroon and Niger, for example. In contrast, staff in LACR and MENAR were less positive overall, with more negative perspectives on innovation culture reported in some countries. Staff struggled without a clear mandate for innovation and lacked the time, resources and support to develop new ideas.

Assessment of approaches

This section provides an evaluation of seven distinct innovation approaches covering four organizational units. It is structured around evaluation questions 2.1 to 2.6, which examine strategic alignment, efficiency, outcomes and sustainability. A summary of the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of the approaches is provided in Annex 4.4. The approaches were selected because they represent UNICEF's main institutional mechanisms for developing, testing, and scaling innovation and together provide a view of how different models contribute to change. While participants highlighted other units and initiatives (particularly in the area of Innovative Finance) that contributed to UNICEF's results and capabilities for innovation, this evaluation focused on drawing lessons from these seven approaches. However, there are important lessons to be learned from financing initiatives such as UNICEF USA's Bridge Fund and the Vaccine Independence Initiative that have embedding of new ways of working into UNICEF's operations, including cross-sector partnerships and new financial instruments.

Objective 2: To examine the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of UNICEF innovation approaches

In summary:

1. All approaches showed alignment with the Goal Areas outlined in UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2022–2025 and contributed to the SDGs. However, governance was disjointed with the seven approaches spanning four divisions, limiting strategic coherence, joint prioritization and decision-making.
2. Innovation approaches were not consistently positioned or communicated as central to UNICEF's strategy due to limited outcomes data, insufficient investment in strategic communications, and senior governance.
3. There were divergent views on whether innovation resources should focus on core programmatic areas or explore new and emerging priorities. Some senior interviewees reasoned that innovation resources needed to be more closely aligned to UNICEF's core areas - such as immunisation, nutrition and WASH.
4. For some participants, the ambition for innovation as a change strategy exceeded the amount of funding available, especially to scale up proven solutions.
5. At the time of this evaluation, UNICEF lacked a systematised or standardised approach to assessing the cost-efficiency and comparative advantage of innovation investments.
6. Some progress was made on the 2019 evaluation of innovation recommendation to consolidate knowledge. While output-level tracking was relatively robust, there was little consolidated data on how the investments yielded measurable improvements in outcomes for children.
7. UNICEF shaped the innovation ecosystem through initiatives such as co-founding the Digital Public Goods Alliance (DPGA), co-leading Giga, and influencing the Global Digital Compact, promoting open-source standards and equity in digital innovation.
8. There was strong evidence of solutions being adopted and/or scaled, with several examples of solutions reaching over a million users and being implemented in multiple countries. Across the approaches, there was relatively limited data on the sustainability of scaled initiatives to date.
9. Innovations were funded to replicate to new contexts in three main ways: by being incorporated into CO budgets, embedded into humanitarian service delivery systems, or adopted through government partnerships. Sustainability planning emphasised government adoption and private-sector engagement. However, the maturity of country-level innovation ecosystems varied considerably, and many governments lacked the capacity or resources to sustain innovations independently.

Overview of the approaches at UNICEF

UNICEF implemented a diverse set of organizational approaches to innovation, each with distinct focuses, priorities, processes, maturity and resources. Table 4 summarises the seven approaches examined in this evaluation. The seven approaches evaluated were found to collectively serve four functions:

- exploring frontier technologies (Nodes, Venture Fund),
- supporting scalable solutions (Portfolios, Hubs, PIC),
- enabling field-level innovation (Global network), and
- entering new business domains (Giga).

Table 4. Summary of the approaches to innovation

Approach (Launch year)	Funding 2019 –2024 (in USD)	Summary	Progress since 2019	Division/ Unit
Nodes (2022)	$562,558	'Trans-disciplinary' research on frontier science and technologies relevant to UNICEF with the aim of launching new areas of expertise in emerging domains.	Collaborations with academia to produce 3 insight reports, 2 case studies, 11 insights briefs, 1 policy brief and a compendium.[88]	OoI
Venture Fund (2014)	$12,723,567	Investments in early-stage, open-source frontier technologies, with a focus on diverse founders in underrepresented markets.	60 start-up investments and 31 CO investments since 2019.	OoI
Portfolios (2021)	$27,260,671	Drive innovation through a portfolio management approach. Includes four high-potential thematic portfolios. Includes SPARK with 9 pre-pilot CO initiatives in 2023.	Piloting and acceleration of 68 new and improved solutions (including SPARK), with examples of collaborations and scaled solutions.	OoI
Hubs (2021–22)	WASH - $10,076,409 LIH - $5,935,587 IF - $3,903,544	Bringing together expertise, technology and resources to drive innovation in respective fields. Each Hub manages a portfolio of 2-6 global initiatives in its focus area.	New fundraising and partnership model to support hubs Initiatives established in collaboration with COs	OoI and PFP (IF)
Giga (2019)	$32,330,592	Collaboration between UNICEF and ITU aiming to connect every school to the internet by 2030.	Global mapping of 2.1m schools in 142 countries on open-source platform;[89] support for connectivity in 34 countries.	OoI
PIC (2011)	$12,524,533	Development of physical product innovations (devices, tools and equipment) through a stage-gate process from exploration to scale.	30 new product innovations have been developed and procured since 2019.[90]	Supply Division
Global network (the last decade)	Unknown[91]	Supporting T4D priorities of COs. INVENT data suggests a focus on digital innovation (45% digital, 30% digital/programme, 12% programme, 13% other).	1,276 innovations and digital solutions logged in INVENT since 2019. Limited data on implementation and results is available.	ICTD

Source: Document review [92]

Alignment with strategic goals and SDGs

Overall, all approaches were aligned with the Goal Areas outlined in UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2022–2025. The largest number of investments were made in Health, Education and WASH (see Table 5). Of the US$91.7 million the OoI spent on innovation initiatives cumulatively from inception to the end of 2024, the most significant investments in terms of monetary value were in learning, which accounted for US$44 million, and WASH, which accounted for US$10.3 million.[93] Smaller investments were made into Child Protection and Social Protection initiatives. These funding patterns were consistent with broader trends observed in other innovation funds, where protection and cross-cutting areas often received less innovation investment.[94] There were several notable exceptions to this, including the Primero solution for case management.

Table 5. Number of innovation initiatives supported since 2019 aligned to each Strategic Plan 2022–2025 Goal Area[95]

UNICEF Five Strategic Goal Areas:	1. Health and nutrition	2. Education and learning	3. Child protection	4. WASH and climate	5. Social protection/ poverty reduction	Cross- cutting (gender, disability and youth)	Other
VF Start-up	12	13	3	11	12		9
VF CO investment	3	10		1	6		11
Portfolios	19[96]	5	1	8		18	8[97]
LIH		2					
WASH Hub				8			
IF Hub							4[98]
GIGA		1					
PIC	25			1		2	2
Global network	289	224	139	106	68[99]	181	269

Source: OoI, VF and INVENT dashboard data; number indicates only the primary theme of an initiative - initiatives are not double counted across rows. The data reported for the global network uses INVENT which does not track which innovations are funded and active.

All approaches also contributed to the SDGs. For example, the Venture Fund had a comprehensive innovation dashboard, which included a link from each investment to the SDGs while several T4D staff had mapped regional innovations to SDGs. Both the Learning Innovation Hub (LIH) and Sustainable WASH Innovation Hub were primarily linked to one SDG. Qualitative analysis suggested that the highest number of innovations contributed to SDG 2 (zero hunger) and SDG 3 (good health and well-being), in particular through the Portfolios and PIC; SDG 4 (quality education), particularly linked to the learning crisis and concerted efforts through the LIH and Giga; and SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) through the Sustainable WASH Innovation Hub and PIC.

The ability to identify and engage in emerging technology areas was a defining feature of the approaches, particularly through the **Venture Fund**, **Nodes**, PIC, Portfolios and Hubs which served as mechanisms for experimentation. These teams enabled UNICEF to engage with and test frontier technologies, and inform policy dialogues in areas such as AI, blockchain and cryptocurrencies, and Digital Public Goods (DPGs). For example, UNICEF's CryptoFund was the first UN mechanism to receive, hold, and disburse cryptocurrency and strengthened UNICEF's reputation as a leader on digital finance for social innovation. The Venture Fund invested in a wide array of early-stage technologies, several of which were later adopted into the Portfolios.

Because frontier initiatives take many years to mature, it is inherently difficult to assess the value of some investments at this stage; however, contributions can be seen in the capabilities and networks that UNICEF has established.

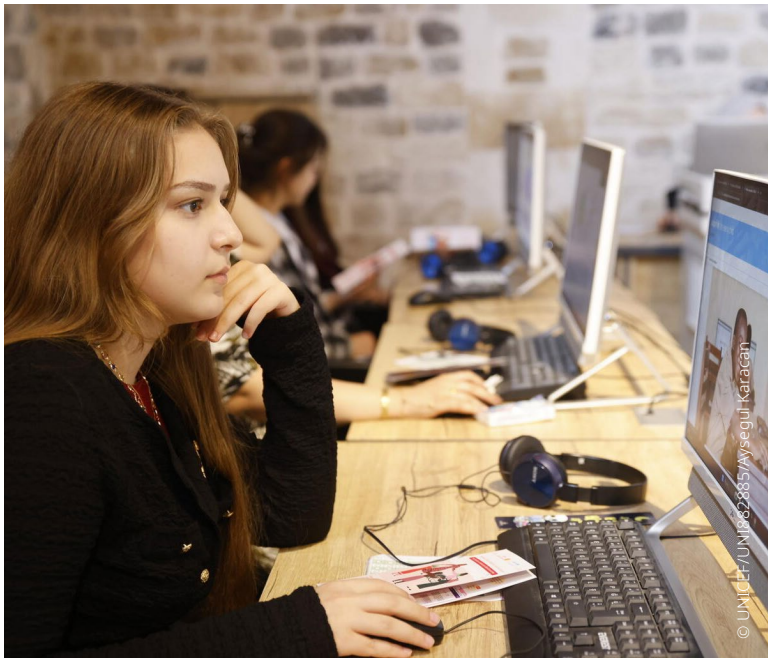
Although the approaches worked towards similar goals, they were spread across four Divisions and units, which made it hard for UNICEF to implement a single, cohesive innovation strategy. Criteria for prioritising initiatives varied: for example, the PIC linked its priorities to SD's Strategic Framework 2022–2025, while the Venture Fund mapped promising initiatives against the Goals Areas. Meanwhile, the global network of innovation and T4D specialists tailored their support to regional or country-specific priorities.

The approaches had great ambition for innovation at UNICEF, but clear prioritisation was a challenge for the larger approaches. Progress was made through the 2024 Innovation Prioritization Mash-Up between the PG, OoI, SD and ICTD, which defined focus areas across the five Goal Areas, such as community health, foundational learning, social protection and climate action. This was an important step towards alignment with programme mandates, yet the themes were broad areas of work rather than clearly bound problem statements that could guide disciplined investment and portfolio management. For example, framing a priority as "the crisis in foundational learning" set a compelling agenda but offered limited operational clarity on which specific barriers, contexts, or vulnerabilities innovation solutions should tackle or how success would be measured.

Evidence from organizational innovation research underscores that effective portfolio management depends on specific, well-defined problems/opportunities. For many organizations, "Innovation" carries **broad and ambiguous appeal**, which can be a strength for attracting support but a weakness for operational clarity.[100] The Innovation Management Standard ISO 56002 states that specific innovation objectives should be defined for different functions and levels and that resources should be allocated **according to these defined innovation objectives** and expected value creation.[101] The broad framing diluted resources across a wide-range of initiatives, with innovation efforts often shaped by staff networks or funding opportunities. This weakened coherence and made it harder to articulate how the approaches collectively contributed to UNICEF's most strategic challenges.

Relatedly, staff across UNICEF lacked understanding about the purpose, scope and achievements of the different approaches, leading to confusion about what innovation is and limiting coherence. For example, some COs were not aware of Venture Fund investments within their countries. Some HQ, staff had limited visibility of CO initiatives within their areas of work. Staff questioned how innovative some initiatives were, and there were contested views on whether connectivity, as an enabler for education (Giga), and working with financial service providers on child-led investing, were within the remit of UNICEF's core mandate.

While inclusion was a recognised priority, there was a need for more consistent frameworks or guidelines to ensure that gender, disability and broader equity concerns were systematically addressed across all innovation initiatives. Three of the approaches included specific innovation portfolios focused on inclusion: the Portfolios approach included a portfolio focused on gender (10 initiatives); the PIC included a portfolio for Assistive Technology; and the Venture Fund had a gender-focused cohort. The Portfolios and global network also both described activities focused on Youth/Adolescence. Several innovations within the health and learning portfolios focused on children with disabilities, in particular using novel technologies for assistive communications. Additionally, some specific initiatives were designed specifically to address gender and social exclusion concerns (Game Changers Coalition, for example). However, these considerations were not universally embedded across all innovation portfolios.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Resource efficiency

Resource prioritisation

Participants expressed **divergent views on how resources for innovation should be prioritised across competing goals**. Several participants noted a persistent mismatch between the ambition for innovation as a change strategy and the amount of funding available to scale up ideas that work. For example, the Portfolio team supported a wide range of thematic portfolios priorities. Similarly, CO staff reported that CO budgets were increasingly heavily earmarked, and UNICEF lacked flexible funding to scale-up innovations that demonstrated results. The availability of flexible, predictable funding as an enabler for innovation is discussed in Section 6.

There were also differing perspectives on where innovation resources should be focused. Some senior interviewees emphasised the need to align innovation efforts more closely with UNICEF's core areas of programme spending - such as immunisation, nutrition and WASH. Some reasoned that it should focus on increasing reach and quality of programmes, and others that it should be invested in exploring new, potentially under-resourced areas. Others focused on the need for aligning investments around a clearer definition of UNICEF's capabilities for innovation. As one senior stakeholder told the evaluation team: "resourcing is a key consideration in the current climate; there is a need to focus on core priorities that can have the most significant impact on child well-being with limited resources." These debates highlight a tension between consolidation and exploration that needs to be addressed to inform how innovation resources are deployed across the organization.

Resource use

Good progress has been made on the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation recommendation to develop a portfolio management approach. The earlier evaluation had highlighted a lack of clarity on whether to focus on early-stage solutions or on scaling existing, tried-and-tested technologies and recommended portfolio management The PIC, Portfolio team and the three Hubs have all adopted a portfolio management approach to systematically explore, test and scale innovations addressing key programmatic challenges. Some parts of the global network of innovation and T4D staff also adopted portfolio management at CO or RO levels and some used the 5D Innovation Framework.

The maturity of the portfolio management approach varied across the approaches using portfolios. A key indicator of active portfolio management is whether underperforming innovations are strategically paused or concluded, allowing resources to be reallocated toward those demonstrating stronger results. There were positive examples of portfolio management, including the PIC's robust stage-gate processes, and the WASH Hub's recent decision to terminate a project that was not delivering outcomes at the expected scale. Several of the Portfolios had also exited lower-performing solutions, and the processes for assessing and documenting portfolio decisions improved over 2023 and 2024 with the introduction of the 5D Innovation Framework. Continued efforts to link stage-gate funding to performance[102] will further embed a learning-oriented innovation cycle.

A key distinction emerged between more established entities, such as the PIC and the Venture Fund, and newer Hubs and Portfolios. While these approaches were similarly broad thematically, they also had much greater operational specificity. For example, PIC developed solutions in areas as varied as oxygen provision, maternal health, and play kits, yet it consistently followed highly structured design, procurement and demand-generation processes. Similarly, the Venture Fund supported AI, blockchain, and virtual reality-driven solutions across different sectors globally but had very clear objectives around the funding levels and technical support that it could provide, and the outcomes expected from these investments. In contrast, innovation Hubs and Portfolios, which were still in earlier stages of their evolution, were yet to fully define their specific innovation support strategies. Greater maturity was clearly linked to sharper focus, stronger structures.

Just over one third of UNICEF's 2024 innovation funding was linked to OOI spending and coded under a SIC. However, for the remaining 65 per cent (US$75.7 million) there were no clear data on spending per initiative, and there was no consolidated documentation on innovation spending by ICTD, or in ROs or COs. While INVENT provided a repository of innovations and digital solutions, including ICTD, RO and CO led innovations, there was no centralised or systematic data on which initiatives were funded or how funds were used. The evaluation's AI analysis of the Country Office Annual Reports (COARs) identified that COs prioritised digital innovations and digital transformation (see Section 3.2.3 for a discussion of the distinctions),

with COs deploying tools such as digital learning platforms, health information systems, and mobile case management apps. Education and climate-related innovation featured prominently, particularly in environmental infrastructure and youth advocacy. T4D staff in ROs played various roles in advising on specific initiatives or supporting COs to develop innovation portfolios. However, the lack of systematically collected information on spending or results of CO initiatives highlighted the need to consolidate learning and ensure efficiencies in how funding is used, particularly given that interview and case study data indicated a tendency towards piloting.

UNICEF does not yet have a systematised or standardised approach to assessing cost efficiency of innovation approaches. A notable exception was the Nodes team, which conducted a structured cost-efficiency analysis of its model. The findings indicated that the Nodes approach achieved cost efficiencies when compared to similar initiatives led by other entities, suggesting that it offered a relatively lean and efficient model for generating knowledge in collaboration with academics and other ecosystem actors.

Organizational outcomes and innovation ecosystem

Organizational outcomes

Measuring innovation outcomes requires assessing not only the development of new solutions but also their impact, scalability and long-term effectiveness in improving humanitarian and development efforts. This section considers how solutions contributed to organizational outcomes in three areas:[103]

- **Consolidated learning and evidence:** Whether new knowledge has been generated or the evidence base has been enhanced around what the solution addresses or its performance.
- **Improved solutions for children:** Whether the solutions offer a measurable, comparative improvement in effectiveness, quality or efficiency over current approaches to the problem.
- **Wide adoption of improved solutions:** Whether solutions are taken to scale and used by others to improve humanitarian or development performance.

Table 6 summarises the degree of contribution of each approach to these criteria, which were chosen due to their use in humanitarian innovation literature.[104],[105] Further details about the specific outcomes achieved by the approaches are described in Annex 4.1.

Table 6. Summary of evidence of approaches contributing to outcomes

	Consolidated learning and evidence	Improved solutions for children	Widespread adoption of improve solutions
Overall evidence for all the approaches	**Low/Moderate**	**Low/Moderate**	**High**
Nodes	**Significant contribution**	No contribution	No contribution
Venture Fund (SU + CO)	Contribution	**Significant contribution**	Contribution
Portfolios team	Contribution	Contribution	**Significant contribution**
Learning Hub	Contribution	Contribution	**Significant contribution**
Sustainable WASH Hub	No contribution	Contribution	No contribution
IF Hub	Contribution	Contribution	No contribution
GIGA	Contribution	Contribution	**Significant contribution**
PIC	Contribution	Contribution	**Significant contribution**
Global network	No contribution	Contribution	No contribution

Some progress was made in consolidating knowledge, a key recommendation from the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation. The evaluation found that learning about solutions did not happen systematically and recommended that "UNICEF should incorporate the time and resources required to document lessons learned and to feed these back as a requisite part of innovation design." Progress towards implementing this recommendation has been made and OoI staff emphasised OoI staff emphasised the importance of exploratory innovation, including activities that build understanding, influence policy, shape markets, or strengthen advocacy. To this end, UNICEF has publishing landscape assessments, case studies and blogs, evaluations and briefs on emerging technologies, hosted reflection sessions and developed an Innovation MEL Toolbox to support evidence generation. However, there was still limited documentation on successes and failures[106] and participation in innovation communities of practice was relatively low.

While output-level tracking (e.g., products developed, trainings delivered) was relatively robust, there was low to moderate evidence on outcomes, impacts or longer-term uptake of the solutions. In the past five years, nine evaluations of innovation initiatives were published,[107] including large-scale solutions like UPSHIFT, Primero and Bebbo, as well as research studies on the Internet of Good Things and Accessible Digital Textbooks (ADTs). While there were no established benchmarks for how many innovations should undergo evaluation within innovation portfolios,[108] [109] the staff survey indicated perceptions that not enough learning was taking place. Only about one-third of survey respondents (34 per cent) agreed that learning from innovation initiatives was well-documented (38 per cent of men and 30 per cent of women, a significant difference) and only 40 per cent agreed data and evidence was used to inform decisions about the development and scale-up of innovations (44 per cent of men and 35 per cent of women, a significant difference). Several private sector partners echoed this, calling for more data on results, including successes and failures.

Interviews with team members from the approaches described significant constraints around knowledge generation and learning. CO Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) teams lacked the bandwidth and funding to support outcome monitoring or evaluation, and both the OoI and PIC had limited human and technical resources for outcome assessment. While the Set Aside funding earmarked resources for evidence generation in 2021 –22 this was temporary, and no sustained mechanism replaced it. Beyond funding and capacity, structural factors also contributed to the weak outcome evidence base. Innovation was not systematically embedded within PME frameworks or Office Management Plans (OMPs), and outcome monitoring was not an explicit accountability for CO PME teams. This created a disconnect between programmatic and innovation learning. This evaluation also did not identify any requirements for reporting on higher-level results (i.e., outcomes or impacts) or accountability for learning or evidence generation as part of innovation funding.

A wide range of solutions for children were supported by approaches teams, although data on their relative advantage to alternatives was mostly unclear. The solutions included products, innovative financing and social solutions, with many being digital and data innovations. There were anecdotal examples of solutions that represented a comparative advantage to others in terms of being cheaper, faster or better tailored to its context. However, as discussed above there was little consolidated data on how the investments yielded measurable improvements in outcomes for children.[110] Only the Venture Fund captured outcome level results from its investments on a dashboard.[111]

There was strong evidence of solutions being adopted and/or scaled, with several examples of solutions reaching over a million users and being implemented in multiple countries. Examples included Giga, UPSHIFT, FunDoo, the Internet of Good Things, Learning Passport and Bebbo. The PIC achieved considerable scale with innovations like the Oxygen Plant-in-a-Box and the Complementary Feeding Bowl. Whilst Venture Fund investments were made at an early stage, five of the 60 start-up investments since 2019 were deployed by multiple COs, and several achieved wide reach. A full list of the 19 innovations that have scaled is provided in Annex 4.3.

Stronger innovation ecosystem

A well-functioning innovation ecosystem requires multiple interdependent elements to support the development, scaling and sustainability of new solutions. To provide a structured framework for assessing contributions, key components of this ecosystem were identified in a literature review and from the OoI's Retrospective Theory of Change.

Documented outcomes show that all approaches played a role in strengthening the ecosystem, although their contributions varied significantly, as would be expected from their different focuses and resource levels. While some initiatives drove technical innovation and knowledge sharing, others enhanced government engagement, financing mechanisms or capacity building. Notably, teams in the approaches operated with vastly differing resources, staffing and coordination, which their contributions. Table 7 below summarises the strength of evidence and examples of contributions to the innovation ecosystem; full findings are elaborated in Annex 4.2.

Taken together, the examples illustrate that the innovation approaches have informed frameworks for social innovation, especially within the UN system. For instance, UNICEF engaged in the UN Secretary-General's (SG) High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation (2018–2019), cofounded the **DPGA**, was a **co-lead of Giga**, and an active **contributor to the Global Digital Compact (GDC)**, all of which align with the SG's call to democratize access to innovation and ensure that technology serves the public good.[112] UNICEF helped define standards for open-source technologies through its role on the DPGA board, and advocated for recognition of DPGs and for child rights in its engagement with the GDC**.** These efforts helped position UNICEF as a key actor for innovation within the UN.

Another notable strength of the innovation approaches was the relatively high proportion of initiatives headed by women. Among Venture Fund start-up investments, half were women-founded and half of the key focal points (UNICEF staff) recorded in INVENT were women.[113] The Venture Fund invested in early-stage start-ups in the global South that faced barriers to traditional funding. This is significant given evidence of persistent underfunding of innovation led by women and minority groups, and even within the humanitarian sector, several evaluations have found that innovations are most often led by men.[114]

Table 7. Approach's contribution and strength of evidence to strengthening innovation ecosystem

Strong evidence
There was particularly strong evidence on how some teams **adopted and promoted open-source tools and platforms.** Evidence primarily came from the Venture Fund and Giga, which championed open-source tools and data. The Venture Fund only invested in open-source solutions, which it complemented with mentoring and support. Giga's connectivity map was open-source, representing the world's largest dataset on public infrastructure. Other examples came from the PIC, which designed an open-license cholera bed blueprint that can be produced by any supplier, and Portfolio innovations like GeoSight, Cboard and Primero.
Moderate evidence
Six approaches teams contributed to **more supportive structures** at UNICEF, including capacity building, new partnership models and procurement processes. For example, the PIC and Venture Fund developed long-term agreements with proven suppliers and explored alternative innovation procurement arrangements. Giga fostered high-profile and innovative private-sector partnerships.
Stronger mechanisms for evidence generation and knowledge sharing were documented by three approaches teams in the form of academic partnerships, presentations at global events and learning frameworks. Nodes partnered with more than 24 academics from multiple institutions to facilitate new transdisciplinary collaborations, positioning UNICEF as a contributor to emerging innovation discussions. The LIH helped governments share knowledge, learning and best practices through the EdTech For Good Framework,[115] and the Learning Cabinet[116] platform matched EdTech solutions to government needs.
Two approaches teams documented their **contributions to diverse, equitable and representative markets.** The Venture Fund invested in early-stage start-ups in the global South that faced barriers to traditional funding. Nearly half (48 per cent) of investments since 2019 were in women-led start-ups, and 10 per cent were deployed in fragile contexts. Other initiatives such as RapidPro and UPSHIFT, which originated from East Africa and Kosovo, respectively, were mainstreamed through the global network.[117]

Five approaches teams contributed to **better visibility of innovation solutions at UNICEF and beyond.** The Innovative Finance Hub's Child-Lens Investing Framework was recognised as one of TIME's Best Inventions of 2024.[118] The Giga map[119] was presented widely and used by COs, governments, the Broadband Commission and with the GSM Association. The LIH's ADTs won the 2024 Zero Project Award for its innovation, impact and scalability, Nodes were recognised by Fast Company World Changing Ideas, and Kits that Fit won a Gold Anthem Award.

Three approaches teams contributed to **strategies to ensure innovations were sustainable and created lasting impact.** These centred on fostering innovative financing, partnerships and market mechanisms. The IF Hub promoted new fundraising streams (e.g. with the Grammy's and major art foundations) and sustainable funding flows beyond traditional grants. The PIC tested cost-effective, sustainable growth through pooled procurement mechanisms, public-private partnerships and collaborations with multilateral organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) to increase the accessibility of its products.

Five approaches teams mentioned working with ministries of health, education, and finance to institutionalise innovations. There were over fifteen anecdotal examples provided to the evaluation team of governments adopting individual solutions, such as Finnish Tech Tool (by the Government of Bhutan with LIH). In INVENT, 63 per cent of innovations logged since 2019 included costs associated with government ministries and personnel in their budget list.

Low to moderate evidence

There was low to moderate evidence of approaches teams **supporting solutions prioritised by COs, including through CO collaborations.** The global network of innovation and T4D staff based in COs supported priorities identified in their office. The Venture Fund made 68 investments into initiatives coordinated and co-led by COs (29 investments since 2019). Several teams noted trade-offs between supporting stronger local ecosystems[120] and delivering readily available and/or scalable solutions. Some interviewees felt many local innovation ecosystems were not sufficiently mature for cutting-edge or high-impact solutions and that COs often did not have the necessary implementation skills or capacities.

There was low evidence about **including marginalised rights holders in the design and implementation of initiatives deployed** by approaches teams. Nodes reported that 66 young people were involved in research processes that shaped topics they investigated. Other approaches teams were likely to have consulted children and young people, but this was not documented.

Sustainability and scale

Overall, the innovation approaches demonstrated growing attention to sustainability and scale, but most remained reliant on UNICEF's continued support and faced challenges in achieving long-term financial viability alongside widespread adoption. The evaluation considered sustainability in terms of prolonged impact, adaptation to changing needs and integration into existing systems without ongoing external support. Scale was considered in terms of increased reach and depth of an innovation, including geographic expansion, increased user uptake and institutional adoption, taking into account the UNICEF's Strategic Plan indicator: "Priority projects for scale are in multiple countries and reaching more than 1 million people".

Sustainability and scaling mechanisms

Innovations replicated to new contexts in three main ways: incorporation into CO budgets, embedding into humanitarian service delivery systems, or adoption through government partnerships**.** Most initiatives supported by the innovation approaches pursued the government partnership route. However, even where innovations were integrated into humanitarian delivery systems or institutionalized by government partners, they typically depended on UNICEF's initial investment and continued technical and/or financial support. The evidence from cases suggests that teams from the approaches alone rarely drive scale-up of innovations alone, which requires champions, political will, market readiness and long-term finance.[121]

Teams from six of the approaches described collaborations with ministries of health, education and finance to integrate solutions into national systems. For example, PIC worked with East African governments to secure national adoption of hearing and mobility aids, enabling sustainable access to assistive technologies, while the Portfolio approach helped integrate

into formal education systems in 10 countries. Across COs, INVENT data indicated that 63 per cent of innovations recorded partnerships with government ministries, ensuring alignment with national priorities that increased the likelihood of long-term adoption.

Many innovations were developed with features designed for adaptability and wider use, such as using open-source, shared documentation, or compatibility with existing government systems. Yet sustained adoption often depended on external factors such as available domestic financing, policy alignment, and political commitment. In this sense, the evaluation distinguishes between innovations that were ready for wider use and those that were ultimately able to achieve it, noting that the latter required enabling systems and sustained partnerships at national level. At the same time, UNICEF should strengthen learning from cases where promising innovations did not progress as hoped, using this learning to inform future investment decisions and avoid repeatedly directing resources toward solutions unlikely to achieve uptake or long-term viability.

The teams highlighted **four areas of learning that were important for effectively engaging governments toward sustainable innovation:**

- **Ensuring affordability**: The PIC promoted the concept of frugal innovation, which prioritised simplicity, cost-effectiveness and scalability. Examples included the Complementary Feeding Bowl, Oxygen Plant-in-a-Box and ADTs.
- **Estimating and fostering demand:** Teams from three approaches described methods to assess and generate demand during piloting. For example, the Sustainable WASH Innovation Hub engaged with governments and COs during landscaping exercises to understand their priority problems, while the PIC developed a demand estimation methodology for products at different stage gates.[122]
- **Managing supply:** The PIC generated pre-orders during Research and Development that encouraged suppliers to invest in the later Design and Development stages. This promoted supplier engagement, minimised reliance on external support and increased the affordability of products as well as their long-term viability and scalability. Governments could order products like the Complementary Feeding Bowl and hearing aids directly from UNICEF.
- **Identifying open-source and locally adaptable solutions:** ADTs converted standard textbooks into AI-powered, accessible digital formats. Governments owned and integrated the technology into national curricula and used the content without licensing fees.


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Teams from four approaches also experimented with innovative finance mechanisms with the aim of improving sustainability. Giga, the Sustainable WASH Innovation Hub and PIC explored Results-Based Financing, Blended Finance and Revolving Funds (such as the WASH Revolving Sanitation Fund in Ghana, Togo and Nigeria) to help governments sustain innovation investments. These mechanisms represented a small proportion of total funds used by the teams but were seen as important experiments in UNICEF's ability to leverage alternative financing models. The Venture Fund also tested mechanisms such as quadratic funding (in collaboration with Gitcoin) and a decentralized anonymous organization (DAO) prototype test (2024) that built UNICEF's credibility and reputation within the Crypto community. The IF Hub's contribution centred on exploring how UNICEF could engage with capital flows to advance child-focused outcomes without incurring direct financial costs, for example, by positioning itself as a technical partner.

While most teams equated sustainability with financial continuity, the Portfolio team broadened this view to include environmental considerations. Through the 5D Innovation Framework they considered environmental risks annually with the aim of ensuring each solution aligned with UNICEF's wider commitments.

Evidence of sustainability and continued relevance

Aside from a few well-documented cases, there was limited data on whether innovations that had been scaled were able to continue operating sustainably. Examples of innovations sustained through different revenue models included Giga, Primero (an open-source case management system that has been integrated into 62 countries' national child protection frameworks) and oxygen systems for low-resource settings (which has been integrated into several government health systems and national procurement plans supported by long-term supplier agreements).[123] However it is important to bear in mind that sustainable financing is a persistent challenge, not only for innovation but also for core programming, reflecting broader constraints in predictable, flexible, and multi-year funding for systems strengthening.[124]

Importantly, many of the innovation approaches were also relatively new and were still testing and refining their operating models alongside developing solutions. For example, the Sustainable WASH Innovation Hub was a little under two years old at the time of the evaluation. Similarly, the Portfolio approach had only recently begun implementing the 5D Innovation Framework for initiative selection and review. These findings should therefore be viewed as formative, reflecting an ongoing process of model refinement rather than mature performance.

Qualitative interviews highlighted that most approaches lacked rigorous methodologies to estimate demand for new innovations, which may limit the long-term sustainability. Without reliable methods to estimate demand, innovations risked being supply-driven – a challenge noted more broadly in the sector. For instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also noted demand articulation as a weakness.[125] The 5D Innovation Framework emphasised iteration and user feedback, but did not provide clear guidance on measuring demand size, urgency or willingness to adopt at scale. Some interviewees noted that approaches often operated on assumptions about need and relevance that were not validated across contexts or over time.

Participants noted that organizational caution toward reputational and financial risk limited UNICEF's ability to explore innovative financing mechanisms and market-based approaches that could have diversified revenue streams. For example, some interviewees reported hesitancy among some leaders to operationalize the IF Hub's Child-Led Investment Framework and the CryptoFund which had slowed progress. Similarly, while the Venture Fund provided non-dilutive capital (i.e., funding without taking equity) to early-stage startups its voluntary return mechanism meant that relatively few contributions were reinvested. The IF Hub was similarly not permitted to charge for technical assistance associated with the Child-led Investment Framework. This collective risk aversion constrained opportunities to explore sustainable, alternative financing models that might have reduced reliance on traditional donor funding.

Innovation initiatives

This section provides an evaluation of 16 innovation initiatives selected from the seven regions. It is structured around evaluation questions 3.1 to 3.5, which examine the contribution of innovation initiatives to programme effectiveness and outcomes for children, as well as their attention to equity, gender and disability inclusion, cost-effectiveness, and potential for scale and sustainability. The case studies were selected to provide an in-depth analysis of different types of innovation and reflect diversity in thematic focus, scale, and maturity. The key enablers and barriers to innovation identified across these cases, together with wider analysis, are presented in Section 6. Further details can be found in Annex 5 which includes the full case studies for each region. A summary of the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of the initiatives is provided in Annex 5.3.

Objective 3: Assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of innovation initiatives to enhance programme effectiveness and accelerate positive outcomes for children

In summary:

1. Innovation initiatives were well aligned with regional and country programmes and priorities, and national government interests.
2. All 16 innovation initiatives demonstrated successful development and delivery of solutions and were able to reach intended users.
3. Delivery success and reach demonstrated strong potential for outcomes and impact, but there was limited data documenting the translation of reach to outcomes for children.
4. There were examples of documented knowledge and insights, but this was inconsistent, and there were few examples of externally validated and externally shared learning.
5. There were specific initiatives focused on solutions for children with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, and some examples of equity and inclusion considerations, but this was not systematically integrated. There were limited examples of child-centred design processes, and inconsistent disaggregation of data.
6. Cost-efficiency was mixed, with some digital solutions representing significant cost savings as compared to traditional programming, if effective. However, other initiatives had high ongoing costs, and there was a lack of cost-effectiveness analysis or comparison to alternative solutions.
7. Four initiatives met UNICEF's criteria for scale, with implementation reaching over 1 million users. Other initiatives were making progress towards scale, with at least nine initiatives operating in multiple countries beyond the pilot stage.
8. All initiatives remained largely dependent on UNICEF resources for maintenance, sustainability and scale. While there were several examples of government adoption, most initiatives had experienced challenges with transitioning to government ownership due to limited resources, lack of prioritisation and changing governments.

Overview of the innovation initiatives in the case studies

Seven regional case studies were developed, exploring between one and three innovation initiatives per region. In total, a sample of 16 innovation initiatives were included. The sample covered a range types of innovations, were at different stages and supported through several different approaches. A number of initiatives were supported by multiple approaches over the lifetime of the initiative. Table 8 summarises the innovations included.



Table 8. Overview of 16 innovations in the case study sample

Region	Initiative (country/ies or regional)	Summary	Type	Stage	Approach[126]
EAP	RapidPro (Fiji)	A digital communication platform that enables real-time monitoring.	Data/ Digital	Accelerate	Country led[127]
ECA	Bebbo (regional)	Parenting app to support early childhood development (age 0-6).	Digital	Accelerate	Venture Fund (RO) / Portfolio (Learning)
	Cboard (North Macedonia)	Assistive communication application for children with disabilities.	Digital	Pilot	Venture Fund (SU) / Portfolio (Learning)
ESA	Giga (regional)	Connecting every school to the internet.	Digital	Scale	Giga / Portfolio (Learning)
	Complementary Feeding Bowl (Madagascar)	Feeding bowl with messaging to support infant and young child feeding (IYCF) in emergencies.	Product	Pilot	PIC
	Africa Data and Drone Academy (ADDA, Malawi)	Higher education programme on data and drone technology.	Data/ Product	Pilot	Country led / Venture Fund (CO, Ethiopia)
LAC	Accessible Digital Textbooks (Paraguay)	Digitisation of traditional textbooks to support children with disabilities.	Digital	Accelerate	Country led / Learning Innovation Hub
	La Travesía Videogame (Guatemala)	A videogame sharing information about mental health and migrant rights.	Digital	Pilot	Country led
MENA	Oxygen Plant-in-a-Box (regional)	Oxygen plant package with medical-grade oxygen production and guidance.	Product	Transition to Scale	PIC
	Kits That Fit (Palestine)	Emergency kits tailored to people's needs and using local supply.	Product	Accelerate	PIC / Portfolio (Humanitarian)
SA	I-HEAR-U (regional)	Social listening using open-source data from ROs.	Digital	Accelerate	Region led
	Weather Kids (Sri Lanka)	Engaging young people in climate monitoring.	Social/ Digital	Pilot	Country led
	Digital Paired Twin Classrooms (Sri Lanka)	Paired classrooms to address science, technology, engineering and mathematic (STEM) teacher shortages.	Social/ Digital	Pilot	Country led
WCA	Recycled Plastic Bricks (Côte d'Ivoire)	Building schools using bricks made from recycled plastic waste.	Social/ Product	Pilot	Country led / Portfolio (Climate change)
	Revolving Fund for Sanitation (RFS, Nigeria)	Blended finance mechanism to increase access to safely managed sanitation.	Finance	Accelerate	Sustainable WASH Hub
	U-Test (Côte d'Ivoire)	Providing young people with HIV information and support.	Digital	Accelerate	Portfolio (Maternal and child health)

Contributions to programme effectiveness

The initiatives aligned with regional and country strategies and were designed to contribute to a broad range of programme outcomes across health, education and youth participation. Some initiatives were developed to increase the effectiveness of existing programmatic activities. For example, the Complementary Feeding Bowl was designed to reinforce and improve IYCF Counselling programmes by providing a child-friendly feeding product. Other initiatives were designed to increase accessibility and reach. For example, Bebbo was designed to expand the distribution of quality early childhood development information.

All initiatives successfully designed, adapted and piloted a solution, achieving delivery objectives and targets at varying levels of scale. Some initiatives faced technical challenges and delays during development, but all initiatives reached at least some direct users. However, this did not always translate to effectiveness in practice. For example, Bebbo represented an extremely successful innovation in terms of delivery, local adaptation, and widespread implementation in ECA, but an independent evaluation raised concerns about effectiveness with user drop off, with three-quarters of people included in the study abandoning the app after the first day.

There was no standardised approach or budget allocation for assessing effectiveness and results for children. Measurement was highly dependent on financial resourcing. While most initiatives had output-level frameworks and reporting, outcome-level data was much less available, particularly long-term outcomes and results for children. ADTs in Paraguay had a MEL framework, but this focused on dissemination and reach, and did not measure changes in children's learning outcomes. Evaluation of Cboard varied by country; its results framework for North Macedonia was limited to the output level due to resourcing and capacity constraints while, in Bulgaria, pre/post testing to assess changes was conducted. For most initiatives, some qualitative data was documented, but this was generally anecdotal and primarily used for communications or as part of small-scale learning exercises, as opposed to robust effectiveness measures. A minority of initiatives were externally evaluated, including Bebbo (randomised control trial study) and the African Drone and Data Academy (mixed methods theory-based evaluation).

Initiative-level reach and outcomes

Initiatives reached right holders at varying scales. Reach data ranged from small-scale pilots reaching 130 children with climate literacy and STEM education (Weather Kids) to improved connectivity for over 24,000 schools and an estimated 11 million children globally (Giga). However, it is noted that reach data is not indicative of positive outcomes and impact.

Most outcomes identified were anecdotal and focused on learning and education. Outcomes were also identified in the areas of health, WASH, early childhood development and UNICEF systems as an enabler of programme effectiveness. Annex 5.1 provides examples of initiative-level outcomes identified through a combination of anecdotal reports from primary and secondary data and evaluation reports where available. Few examples were externally validated.

Initiatives were assessed against three main outcome areas for successful innovation investments: consolidated knowledge, improved solutions, and adoption at scale.[128] The paragraphs below summarise overall findings against each area. Annex 5.2 provides a table of key findings per initiative.

Consolidated knowledge: Most initiatives documented some knowledge, but this was inconsistent; there were limited examples of externally validated or shared evidence and learning. Internal project-based reporting tended to document progress on activities, outputs and reach, with some documentation of adaptation and learning. Large and well-resourced initiatives such as Bebbo and Giga had notably more knowledge products. Independent evaluations tended to be published, but there was limited evidence of active dissemination and engagement of internal or external stakeholders with evidence and the application of lessons learned to other innovations.

Improved solutions: There was a lack of evidence demonstrating whether initiatives represented an improved solution compared to existing or alternative tools or approaches. In particular, the evaluation only identified one comparative study. All initiatives had anecdotal evidence of positive use cases, primarily used for marketing and communications. However, most teams made assumptions about the effectiveness and added value of the solution based on the needs they had identified and data on the number of people reached. For example, for Bebbo, a landscaping study identified a lack of

comprehensive, quality online information adapted in local languages and to local contexts. It was assumed that the successful delivery and dissemination of a product that filled this gap, alongside wider national support systems, would contribute to positive results for children.

Adoption at scale: Several initiatives had scaled or were making progress towards scale, such as Giga, Bebbo and the Complementary Feeding Bowl. ROs and COs continued funding implementation, including for expanding pilots within countries and supporting uptake by additional UNICEF COs. A number of initiatives had been replicated, or were in the process of replication, to multiple countries in the region, such as Cboard, Complementary Feeding Bowl, ADTs, RFS and ADDA. There were several examples of government uptake, such as ADTs in Paraguay and the Complementary Feeding Bowl in Madagascar, but evidence of long-term adoption and transition of ownership was limited overall.


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Equity, gender equality and inclusion

Many innovation initiatives were developed to address inequity and exclusion. Several targeted children with disabilities, including Cboard (a digital augmentative and alternative communication [AAC] tool) and ADTs (making traditional textbooks more accessible). La Travesía Videogame was designed to support children in migration shelters and Digitally Paired Twin Classrooms was designed to support children in remote, low-resource schools. Other initiatives were designed to reach broad audiences, including, but not focused on, marginalized groups. Some efforts to increase accessibility were implicit in the solution, such as digital tools like Bebbo and Cboard, which were adaptations of apps typically available in English in high-resource contexts, tailored to national languages and contexts, a gap not otherwise filled by the market.

Outside of specifically targeted groups, there was a general lack of consistent equity considerations integrated into initiative design and implementation processes. For example, although Cboard inherently considered children with disabilities, as a disability-focused initiative, gender inclusion and inclusion of children in poverty was not clearly considered in the design. ADDA and Weather Kids encouraged and tracked women's participation, but did not consider children or young people with disabilities.

Engagement and consultation with children and marginalised groups in the design or adaptation process varied but was generally limited. La Travesía Videogame provided a strong example of inclusive design, with UNICEF and partners conducting multiple focus groups with boys and girls in migration shelters to understand their perspectives and learning preferences. Similarly, RapidPro incorporated FGDs with women's groups and youth and children's groups during the development process. However, this was generally the exception, with most initiatives relying more heavily on senior expertise and ad hoc engagement with a limited number of representatives, rather than meaningful child-centred design and adaptation.

Disaggregated data on participation, reach and outcomes was inconsistent. Disaggregation by gender was typically more available, but not for all initiatives. Data on the participation of children or adults with disabilities and other marginalized groups was less available. Outcomes and results for marginalized children and specific vulnerable groups tended

to be anecdotal rather than formally measured and documented. The lack of disaggregated data collection and outcome measurement limited the ability for initiatives to capture learning and improve inclusion efforts. Equity and inclusion were generally 'add-on' or post-implementation considerations, rather than foundational design principles.

Gender inclusion: Several initiatives achieved a gender balance in participation, but most did not fully consider or address systemic barriers to gender equality, and there were missed opportunities for initiatives to be gender transformative. Some initiatives, such as Kits That Fit, had a strong, explicit focus on gender inclusion. For example, the 'Adolescent Girl Personal Care Kits' and information booklet provided with Kits That Fit addressed specific hygiene, health, nutrition and protection needs of adolescent girls, particularly during menstruation, and the kit was based on global guidance on adolescent girl empowerment programming in emergency contexts. For ADDA, 60 per cent of students enrolled were women, and 55 per cent of graduates were women. This exceeded targets, but an independent evaluation of ADDA found that the programme lacked more gender-transformative approaches to tackling challenges facing women in STEM, with no specific or tailored support for women participants. For some initiatives, a lack of gender-inclusive design processes limited women's engagement. For example, RFS did not include explicit targeting and inclusion mechanisms for women in the initial design, and only 7.8 per cent of loans were disbursed to women in 2022. For La Travesía Videogame, although girls participated in the design process, their specific interests were not well catered for in design decisions, which limited their interest in the game.

Disability inclusion: Outside of initiatives specifically targeting children with disabilities, there was a general lack of disability inclusion considerations in design and implementation processes. For example, for the three ROSA initiatives, no specific disability-focused adaptations were identified and there were no systematic mechanisms to disaggregate data or act on data by disability. The evaluation of ADDA identified an absence of students with disabilities due to a lack of targeted accommodations and accessibility measures. While Bebbo included content relevant to children with disabilities, the design of the application was not specifically tailored for application users with disabilities. However, it is noted that some product innovations included disability considerations. The design and iteration of the Complementary Feeding Bowl addressed feedback on disability inclusion to improve accessibility, incorporating adaptations for children and caregivers with visual impairment, arthritis and children with cerebral palsy, and for Kits That Fit, one of the five implementing partners specialised in working with children with disabilities and played a key role in targeting adolescent girls with disabilities.

Economic inclusion: Initiatives demonstrated varied success in reaching the poorest communities. Digital initiatives such as Cboard required access to a tablet or smartphone device, which participants noted as a prohibitive cost for the poorest households. ADDA's initial programme offered scholarships to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, but higher-level education was a prerequisite for enrolment, excluding more marginalized young people with limited access to formal education. The identification of this gap in ADDA's independent evaluation resulted in recent developments to add a new climate education project for both in-school and out-of-school children. Some initiatives included economic inclusion in the selection and targeting criteria. Giga focused on connecting remote, underserved communities to the internet, and Weather Kids engaged children in marginalized plantation communities. La Travesía targeted children in underserved, high-risk "red zones" where there was less digital access and infrastructure and provided both the hardware and internet access to these locations so that children could use the videogame.

Digital literacy and infrastructure: Several initiatives relied on users having access to digital technology and digital literacy which might have limited reach and equal participation**.** For example, Weather Kids was adapted as not all children had reliable access to devices and connectivity. Equitable reach of RapidPro was limited by connectivity issues in outer islands and remote areas. Gaps in digital infrastructure and skills risk undermining access and representation in digital initiatives. Giga represented an example of UNICEF specifically investing to rectify this.

Cost effectiveness

Initiatives often aimed to improve cost-efficiency, but formal cost-efficiency or effectiveness analyses was rare. A lack of comparative economic data limited the ability to assess value for money. An exception was observed in the cases in WCAR, where all three innovations demonstrated positive estimated cost-benefits over conventional alternatives. For example, Plastic Bricks demonstrated substantial cost savings, with UNICEF audits (2018–2022) confirming unit costs 30–40 per cent lower than traditional fired-brick classrooms, while also offering environmental benefits through reduced embodied carbon. U-Test, a self-testing HIV screening initiative, demonstrated clear preliminary cost advantages over clinic-based outreach, with an estimated cost of US$3.50 per completed test, compared to approximately US$5.20 via clinics. A full unit-cost analysis was planned for late 2025.

Cost-saving was often a key motivation for innovation teams and motivated the design of at least four of the innovations. For example, the I-HEAR-U social listening platform enabled ROSA to reduce staff time required for manual data analysis while providing scalable insights across multiple COs. Kits that Fit aimed to improve aid relevance by including appropriate products in distributions, thereby reducing wastage. Several published evaluations of UNICEF-supported innovations indicated potential cost-efficiency in resource use, such as reduced staff time, improved targeting or lower delivery costs.

New technologies and digital innovations were utilized to reduce costs, both in terms of the initial concept and in adaptations and further development. Bebbo, for example, cost an estimated US$1 –2 per user, which represented a cost-saving compared to non-digital forms of information dissemination and support. Kits that Fit provided digital real-time feedback, reducing the need for third party monitoring. External stakeholders commented that, if scaled, Cboard would be cost saving in comparison to traditional non-digital AAC tools.

Some initiatives incorporated advances in AI to reduce costs. For example, ADTs reduced costs through UNICEF's global partnership with OpenAI, with creation time decreasing from up to a year to approximately a month, and costs dropping from US$10,000-US$20,000 per book to US$1 per page[129]. I-HEAR-U was updated to include automated AI-powered analysis (i-Hear 2), allowing real-time processing that further reduced staff's workload in generating reports.

High operating costs and emerging subscription models posed risks to sustaining some innovations. An evaluation of ADDA found that, despite success, the programme faced high costs associated with a reliance on expensive international tertiary institutions, high personnel costs and complex procurement processes. RapidPro faced costs related to monthly fees to the company (TextIt) hosting the platform, SMS charges that were expensive in Pacific Island countries, and staff time needed to train people to use the system. Though Cboard was developed as a free, open-source application with UNICEF Venture Fund start-up capital, the company released plans in 2025 to transition to a subscription fee model to cover maintenance and new developments, presenting a risk to sustained usage and scale.

Several examples highlighted the unpredictability and efficiency challenges associated with innovating in complex humanitarian contexts. For example, staff working on Kits that Fit anticipated that local procurement would reduce costs and waste compared to international shipping, but this was no longer viable in Gaza due to the destruction of local manufacturing capacity. Oxygen Plant-in-a-Box underestimated the effort and expertise required for in-country site preparation and engineering support, and faced particular infrastructure constraints in Yemen, which increased costs.

Sustainability and scaling

There were examples of initiatives that successfully sustained implementation beyond the initial piloting stage, with a number expanding to new regions and countries. At least nine initiatives continued to operate, including Bebbo, Giga, ADDA, Cboard, Kits that Fit, Complementary Feeding Bowl, ADTs, RapidPro and I-HEAR-U, all of which were implemented in multiple countries. Giga provided technical and strategic connectivity support in 34 countries and is reported to have increased access to connectivity in over 24,000 schools, reaching 11 million students. ADTs expanded regionally and globally over the past ten years, with UNICEF raising US$3 million for LACRO implementation from 2021 –2025 and replication in Colombia, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Nicaragua and Uruguay. In 2024 –2025, ESARO was supporting the replication of ADDA to South Africa and Ethiopia in the region, based on lessons learned from Malawi. Bebbo was implemented in 16 countries in ECA, and RapidPro expanded to 10 of 14 countries in the Pacific. At least four innovations met UNICEF's KPIs for scaling, with

implementation in multiple countries and reaching over 1 million people (Bebbo, Complementary Feeding Bowl, Giga, Kits that Fit).

There were several examples of government ownership and funding beyond UNICEF pilot implementation. For example, there was strong government ownership for ADTs, with the Paraguay Ministry of Education and Sciences maintaining technical staff to oversee implementation and continuing to provide technology, teacher training and host ADTs on government websites. Giga expanded with financial contributions from multiple governments, and there were examples of governments using Giga tools to increase and guarantee connectivity in schools. For example, the Government of Kyrgyzstan used the Giga school mapping to renegotiate internet contracts and reduce prices by almost half. In Kenya, Giga tools were being used in a 1,000 schools connectivity project financed by the European Union. In Madagascar, following an initial UNICEF-funded pilot of 20,000 Complementary Feeding Bowls, the government used World Bank funding to purchase 260,000 bowls for distribution across the country.

While most initiatives had strong alignment with national priorities and strong national and local partnerships, this was generally not sufficient to establish long-term, sustainable funding mechanisms or external adoption. The majority of initiatives either closed after piloting or were maintained primarily through UNICEF funding and human resources. Most initiatives generated government interest and buy-in, with examples of joint programming, but there were few examples of full adoption of the solution by external organizations or governments. The case of direct government procurement of the Complementary Feeding Bowl in Madagascar was an exception; while there was government buy-in and support in other countries, at the time of evaluation COs relied on UNICEF resources to make additional purchases. Oxygen-Plant-in-a-Box was enabled through UNICEF's engagement with the global partnerships such as Every Breath Counts, and a new partnership with the Global Oxygen Alliance (GO2AL), illustrating the potential of leveraging global collaborations to advance sustainability, but had not led to government procurement.

Where there was national support, changes in government presented a risk to sustainability. La Travesía Videogame, for example, established a strong partnership with the Secretariat of Social Welfare, with plans to scale nationally, but a change in government in 2024 put these plans on hold indefinitely. Although the new government expressed general willingness to support UNICEF programmes, the videogame had not since been prioritized.



Enabling factors and barriers

This section assesses the enabling and hindering factors influencing innovation in UNICEF. It is organised around evaluation questions 4.1 to 4.3 under Objective 4, which explored scaling or accelerating initiatives, the innovation ecosystem, learning, insight, thought leadership, culture and capacity. The final sub-section provides information about UNICEF's thought leadership and examples of disruption in the sector.

Objective 4: To identify and analyse the enabling and hindering factors influencing innovation within UNICEF, the generation of new knowledge and thought leadership to influence the innovation ecosystem and promote child rights

In summary:

1. Strong leadership support for innovation, particularly at CO and RO levels, was a critical determinant of success or failure. When leadership was not supportive, it constrained initiatives or "killed innovation".
2. Institutionalising innovation required staff with the time, resources and capacities to deliver initiatives and engage with counterparts at HQ, ROs and COs. The absence of an innovation focal point and/or manager was a barrier, particularly for ROs and COs where innovation-related responsibilities were additional to regular workloads.
3. Lack of documented outcome measurement and learning hindered assessing the effectiveness of UNICEF's innovation efforts. Inadequate knowledge management resulted in lost institutional memory about initiatives and limited how learnings about success and failures could be disseminated and incorporated into future endeavours.
4. The risks of innovation, such as uncertainty, failure and adaptation, were not widely endorsed by stakeholders outside of innovation functions. At the same time, there were few systematic ways to integrate ethics into innovation design and implementation.
5. Communication about the definition and initiatives of innovation at UNICEF has led to a perceived intangibility of innovation efforts among staff, including senior leaders, making it difficult for staff to unite around and understand innovation efforts.
6. Inadequate consideration of demand and long-term sustainability led to high levels of short-term piloting.
7. Allocating significant resources to the critical stage between early piloting and full-scale implementation enabled some initiatives to achieve impressive reach and acceleration.
8. Innovation partnerships were hindered by UNICEF's complex and rigid systems, coupled with slow decision making and lengthy contracting processes.
9. Aspects of the digital divide created challenges for implementing and scaling innovations. This materialised through connectivity issues, disparities in access to devices and digital literacy.
10. Participatory, user-centred design approach with prospective end users was essential to inform the design, prototyping, testing and validating initiatives.

Overview

Innovation in UNICEF operated within a complex ecosystem shaped by numerous enabling factors and barriers influencing the success or failure of initiatives. The factors identified in this evaluation (Table 9) represent a synthesis drawn from the validation workshops, global survey, in-depth interviews, focus groups and case studies. Factors were sometimes found to be both an enabler and barrier to innovation, demonstrating how they can facilitate it when present and obstruct it when not in place. The factors have been categorised as either internal or external to UNICEF, and are highlighted as both a barrier or enabler in some cases.

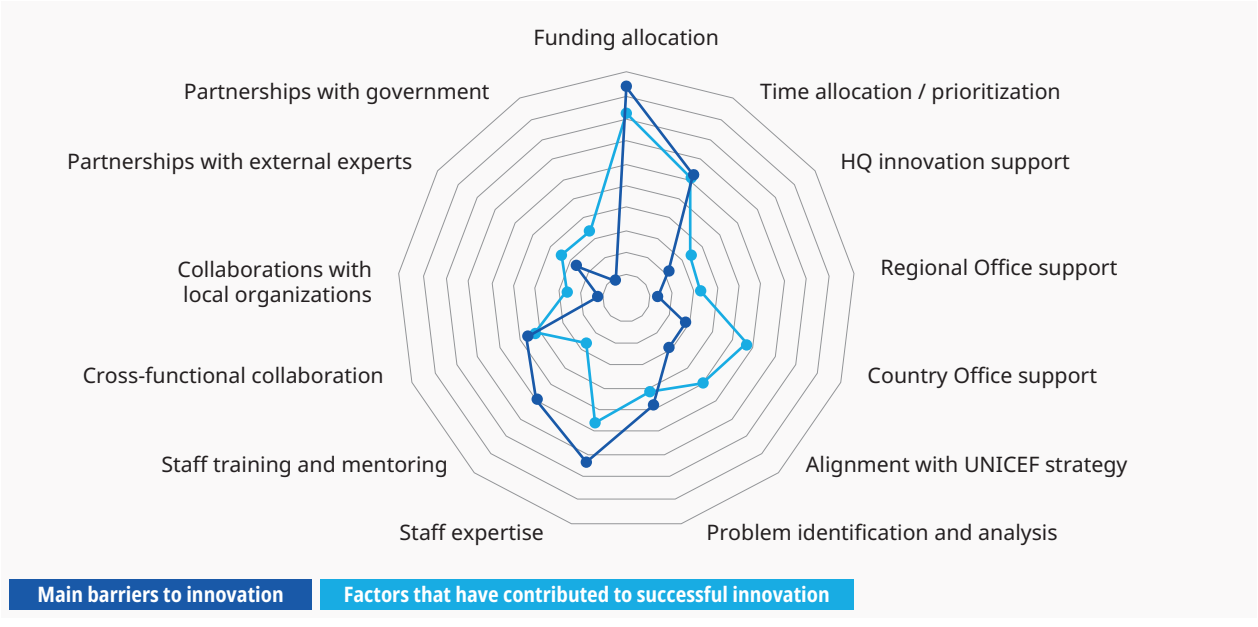


Table 9. Enabling factors and barriers

Factor	Internal or External	Enabler, barrier or both	Organizational relevance
Leadership and senior management support	Internal	Both	All levels
Weak monitoring, evaluation and evidence of impact	Internal	Barrier	All levels
Limited acceptance of innovation risk and failure	Internal	Barrier	All levels
Visibility and communication about innovation	Internal	Barrier	All levels
Insufficient sustainability planning	Internal	Barrier	HQ and COs
Support for acceleration to scale	Internal	Enabler	All levels
Dedicated technical capacity	Internal	Both	Particularly relevant to COs
Rigid compliance, procurement, and partnership systems	Internal	Barrier	Particularly relevant to HQ and COs
Donor funding for innovation	External	Both	All levels
Digital divide	External	Barrier	Particularly relevant to COs and HQ
Engagement of local stakeholders and end users	External	Enabler	Particularly relevant to COs

Staff perspectives captured in the survey particularly emphasised funding allocation and time allocation/prioritization (see Figure 3), reflecting the practical realities of implementing innovation within resource-constrained environments. There were no notable differences by gender.

Figure 4. Staff perspectives on factors supporting innovation or present barriers to innovation at UNICEF



Source: Staff survey

The findings in this section aligned closely with the broader literature, confirming that many of the challenges and enablers UNICEF faced were systemic across the sector and in other sectors. For instance, studies on scaling innovation emphasise those that scale cost-effectively typically require strong evidence, low unit-costs per user, alignment with public delivery platforms and robust local partnerships and demand.[130],[131] However, ethical considerations and discussions featured much more prominently in the literature on innovation than in the evaluation data, where there was less discussion on how to manage ethical risks. For instance, innovation ethics was identified in an OECD paper on enabling factors for innovation, but did not feature strongly in the evaluation data in terms of design and implementation considerations in the initiatives reviewed.[132] There were protocols for due diligence on private sector engagement and ethical guardrails in the DPG application process. Yet, other initiatives were not consistently tested against similar standards - particularly those involving emerging technologies, data use, or direct engagement with vulnerable populations. Given the vulnerable population UNICEF works with, this highlights the need to incorporate ethical frameworks and safeguards more robustly in future innovation efforts to ensure new initiatives do not inadvertently cause harm or reinforce inequities. The 5D Innovation Framework already provides useful guidance on incorporating risk management and ethical reflection throughout the innovation cycle that can be embedded into innovations.

The approaches discussed in Section 4 aimed to contribute to a stronger ecosystem for innovation at UNICEF and emphasised many of the factors addressed in this section. This included supportive structures, evidence generation mechanisms and buy-in for solutions. There were notable gaps between the ecosystem outcomes the approaches targeted and some of the most critical enabling factors identified in the evaluation. This included the importance of sustainability planning and demand estimation as well as overcoming rigid procurement and partnership systems. While there were activities in these areas, the approaches were less systematic in tackling these structural and procedural barriers.

Internal factors

Leadership and senior management support

Strong leadership support for innovation, particularly at CO and RO levels, was as a critical determinant of initiatives' success or failure in the case studies, staff survey and global interviews. In the staff survey, 41 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that senior staff in their office championed innovation initiatives. Senior management promoted innovation by enabling risk-taking, increasing financial and/or human resources for initiatives, and promoting internal buy-in for initiatives. This support was instrumental for advancing their design, implementation and early uptake. At the CO level, interviewees emphasised the importance of leadership embedding innovation by allocating or identifying resources and including it in funding proposals. They also noted how critical leadership was to building trust and demand for innovation within the programmatic areas; this was more effective and enabled stronger collaboration with internal partners when championed by senior management. At the RO level, leadership played a central role in initiating and coordinating solutions to ensure alignment with regional priorities, mobilising interest across COs and facilitating cross-learning about initiatives.

When leadership was not supportive, it constrained initiatives or, as a staff member described, "killed innovation". This was particularly relevant in COs where leaders who were disinterested or uninvested in innovation did not prioritise it, resulting in fewer or no initiatives. CO or RO senior management turnover also shifted priorities and disrupted initiatives. For example, for ADDA in Malawi and CBoard in North Macedonia, when leadership changed, support decreased. This resonated with the literature review where leadership changes deprioritising innovation increased the vulnerability of staff and initiatives to being phased out.[133]

> "UNICEF is very strong also because we're standing on the shoulders of giants before us who understood many things and they built a very strong organization. But that is not a given, that is something that has to move forward all the time. So you need strong leaders who actually allow us to continue to innovate in this changing world and have the organization adapt to it and also lead in it...I hope that UNICEF will be resilient enough and also have enough leadership behind it that they will see that." – UNICEF Stakeholder

Weak monitoring, evaluation and evidence of impact

The lack of documented outcome measurement and learning about initiatives or approaches limited the ability to assess their effectiveness. As discussed in Section 5.2, the absence of robust evidence made it difficult for staff to gauge both real success stories and failures to support internal learning, capacity building and evidence informed decision-making. The absence of impact data across the case studies also created challenges for securing sustained funding, convincing partners of the value of initiatives at scale and advocating for replicating or institutionalising initiatives. The EAFE of the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 found UNICEF practices incentivised "reporting over research and analysis."[134] The literature review highlighted this issue was not unique to UNICEF and the way organizations defined success and measure outcomes was highly variable across the sector.[135]

Inadequate knowledge management resulted in a loss of institutional memory about initiatives and limited the extent to which learnings about success and failures could be disseminated. Without sufficient documentation, staff struggled to build on past work or know which types of initiatives UNICEF supported and where, including why they might or might not have been successful in certain contexts. Limited documentation was particularly challenging given UNICEF's mobility exercise[136] and extensive use of consultants. These contributed to staff turnover and the associated loss of institutional knowledge, making it difficult for staff uninvolved in initiatives to identify relevant information. As described in Section 4.4, this gap was triangulated by survey data, where only one-third of survey respondents (34 per cent) agreed that learning from initiatives was well-documented. The issue was similarly highlighted as a challenge in the literature review, notably in the EAFE of the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 and the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation.

Limited acceptance of innovation failure

Failure and adaptation were not widely endorsed by stakeholders outside of innovation functions. This stifled learning by disincentivising staff to report on and share lessons from failed initiatives and sometimes discouraged experimentation. While strategic documents acknowledged the link between innovation and failure, the evaluation did not identify strong processes for tracking, monitoring and learning from unsuccessful initiatives. While acknowledging failure is critical to learning about how initiatives could be adapted to improve the chances of future success, some staff flagged they were disincentivised from officially recording failures or admitting to initiatives not being on track due to potential repercussions on career progression. Survey results highlighted these gaps, where only 26 per cent of respondents in the survey agreed there was a high tolerance for risk-taking for innovation in their office and 28 per cent agreed failure was welcomed and recognised as a learning opportunity.

Insufficient sustainability planning

For many initiatives, inadequate consideration about demand and long-term sustainability led to high levels of short-term piloting. Without sufficient sustainability planning, including identification and mitigation of risks, such as government transitions mid-initiative, and adequately estimating demand, many case study initiatives ceased operating when UNICEF's financial support ended (e.g., RapidPro, La Travesia, WeatherKids). The literature review found this was common when agencies invested in discrete, short-term, timebound, proof-of-concept pilots with few resources, processes and incentives to replicate or scale.[137],[138],[139] It also highlighted that many organizations lacked compelling evidence to justify investments and go through "hype cycles" of pushing innovations without evaluating fit or sustainability.[140] Lessons from successful scaling efforts at UNICEF echoed a recent OECD paper that found that, without deliberate investment in demand creation, adoption processes, and policy alignment, even highly promising innovations risk becoming "islands of excellence" rather than system-wide transformations.[141] Therefore, when pursuing scale through transition to government ownership, innovation was more successful when local actors set priorities and controlled funding for implementation to support continuity, long-term adaptation and sustainable handover to local actors.[142]

Support for acceleration to scale

UNICEF invested in pilots and allocated significant resources to the critical 'missing middle' stage of innovation life cycles (i.e., the stage between early piloting and full-scale implementation), which enabled some initiatives to achieve impressive reach and acceleration. UNICEF's access to flexible innovation funding allowed it to bridge the 'missing middle' more effectively than some comparator organizations and establish clear scaling processes for some initiatives. When UNICEF dedicated resources to scaling initiatives with sufficient demand and buy-in, it was able to achieve extensive reach and integration with governments. Notable examples from the case studies included Giga, ADTs, Oxygen Plant-in-a-Box and Bebbo.

Dedicated technical capacity

Staff with the time, resources and capacities to deliver initiatives and engage with counterparts at HQ, RO and COs were key enablers to institutionalising innovation. At the global level, these staff built partnerships, oversaw innovation portfolios or thematic areas and developed initiative strategies. This was observed with ADTs where a dedicated focal point facilitated cross-working relationships between the OoI, ICTD and COs as well as regional scale up by advocating for more funding from donors, and also enabled lesson learning and securing private sector support through its OpenAI partnership. Similarly, colleagues in the Supply Division and PG supported coordination across COs to support the uptake and roll out of the Complementary Feeding Bowl. At the RO level, focal points oversaw regional portfolios and connected COs to share learnings (e.g. ADTs, Oxygen Plant-in-a-Box, I-HEAR-U). In COs, the focal point or manager embedded an innovation culture in the office by onboarding colleagues to the initiatives, securing funding for innovation, supporting project design and navigating processes (e.g. La Traversia, Kits that Fit, RapidPro). In Guatemala, staff members commented this position was catalytic for transforming attitudes and instilling an innovation mindset in the programmatic areas.

> "[Innovation] cannot be handled in a multitasking pace when team members need to follow their dense schedule. It requires dedicated resources, including professionals, who need to take innovation as their main duty, focus on it and later implement and scale it wherever needed/applicable." - Staff survey

The absence of an innovation focal point and/or manager was a barrier, particularly for ROs and COs, where innovation-related responsibilities were additional to regular workloads. This created siloed ways of working, information gaps and contributed to difficulties with coordinating regional strategies. As described in Section 3.5, staff perceptions were mixed regarding the availability of technical knowledge and skills, particularly at RO and CO level. COs without an innovation manager were unlikely to have staff with the necessary support or time to innovate, test and scale new solutions. COs also noted varied capabilities and interest amongst the ICT function. Depending on the office, this role ranged from primarily undertaking networks systems administration to deeper engagement in designing and implementing initiatives. The EAFE of the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 and the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation found that COs and ROs faced critical challenges with employing "fit for purpose staffing and expertise" in emerging priorities like innovation and that UNICEF's "rigid staffing structures" hindered its ability to deploy technical expertise and specialist.[143] The comparator analysis found that UNICEF's innovation functions were less focused on how to support innovation arising in COs and ROs compared to other organizations. As funding becomes more constrained, UNICEF's ability to localise innovation capabilities and bring them closer to operational settings is likely to be a key competitive advantage.

> "I believe that every office should have an innovation officer because it is very useful. Not only in terms of raising funds externally, but also in identifying solutions and pushing all the programmatic areas in identifying and thinking out of the box and identifying technology-based solution or innovative solutions…in order to make our programs more effective in terms of a better use of the resources and in terms of reaching out more children." – UNICEF Stakeholder

Rigid compliance, procurement and partnership systems

UNICEF's complex and rigid systems, coupled with slow decision-making and lengthy contracting processes, hindered some innovation partnerships. Inflexible, lengthy procurement processes with stringent requirements for new suppliers favoured established vendors over new partners. Limited flexibility in terms of references and cash flow constraints for suppliers was particularly problematic for more innovative or early-stage partners. For instance, Kits that Fit took a year from inception to implementation due to a complex contracting process with a local start-up and the Nodes took a year to design a Memorandum of Understanding template for its academic partnerships. Beyond these procedural barriers, innovation teams were sometimes unaware of different types of partnership models or ways of innovating. While the OoI began characterising business models for innovation in UNICEF, further capacity building was needed to help staff understand the full range of mechanisms (e.g., innovation through collaborations, procurement or in-house development), as well as distinct contracting and procurement requirements as each comes with distinct contracting, risk and legal implications.[144],[145] Staff with deep institutional knowledge and experience of UNICEF's processes ("expert bureaucrats," as one stakeholder described them) navigated systems more effectively. However, the complexity of contracting routes and how to interact with procurement entities was time consuming and made it difficult for many staff to align with innovation processes. This was corroborated in the literature review, where internal procurement systems in development agencies made it harder to achieve innovation goals.[146]

External factors

Donor funding for innovation

UNICEF benefited from flexible innovation funding at the global level, which enabled greater investment in piloting and scaling initiatives. This included dedicated innovation funding from UNICEF, government donors, the private sector and philanthropists. Set Aside funding under the discretionary authority of the Secretary Director played a critical role in establishing UNICEF's portfolios, investments and research. Allocations of US$2.2M in 2020 and US$36.12M in 2021 enabled support for pilots and for scaling up initiatives based on submissions made to the OoI. The OoI built on these investments to secure funding from a wide range of sources. In 2023, of the US$109 million spent on innovation across the whole organization, 26 per cent (US$30.0M) came from government sources, primarily Sweden (US$5.0M), Netherlands (US$4.2M) and Finland (US$3.2M), while 40 per cent (US$43.3M) was contributed from UNICEF core (regular) resources, and 17 per cent US($17.9M) via National Committees (NatComs). Figures were similar in 2024, with 27 per cent (US$30.7M) of the US$116 million from government sources, 36 per cent (US$41.3M) from regular resources and 21 per cent (US$24.4M) from NatComs. These flexible sources allowed UNICEF to reallocate funds across initiatives and prioritise acceleration. Although this funding offered flexibility, tensions emerged around how to allocate funding across the innovation pipeline, between global-level investments in acceleration versus piloting at country level without clear pathways to scale.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital innovation as ambition for using remote methods to engage intended beneficiaries was matched with a significant increase in funding. During a time of global restrictions on social interactions, donors understood the value and need for increased digital engagement in development and humanitarian settings to replace traditional, face-to-face delivery mechanisms. COVID-19 was also an important driver for Oxygen innovations, which led to the creation of initiatives like the Oxygen Plant in Box.

Digital divide

Aspects of the "digital divide" were highlighted in several case studies as a challenge for implementing and scaling innovations. Effective implementation was hindered by gaps in access to equipment (e.g. computers, mobiles and tablets), connectivity infrastructure (i.e. internet access), and the unaffordability of digital access (e.g. cost of data, hardware or internet). Examples of how this affected implementation in case studies included ADTs where hardware (e.g. computers and tablets) and infrastructure to provide internet access were not widely available in Paraguayan schools. The Ministry of Education and Sciences and UNICEF addressed these inequities by providing equipment to schools as well as creating an online and offline version of the books. In WeatherKids, digital access was a persistent barrier, and many children had limited or no access to smartphones or had data plans restricted to social media

use. Some required pre-downloaded content from mentors just to participate in video-based learning, and poor internet connectivity further constrained their ability to engage with the broader digital learning environment. For the videogame, the migration shelters did not have equipment to use the game, so UNICEF provided both internet access and tablets. For Kits that Fit, integrating QR codes was intended to facilitate real-time feedback from affected communities and support Accountability to Affected Populations. However, the approach did not yield real-time data or effective feedback due to limited electricity and restricted internet access in Gaza during the ongoing conflict. These findings underscore the need for a more comprehensive design stage incorporating human-centred design principles and research about the technographic landscape of innovation efforts.

Engagement of local stakeholders and end-users

Participatory, user-centred design approach with prospective end users was essential for informing the design, prototyping, testing and validation of initiatives. This process engaged prospective users through various mechanisms (such as FGDs, KIIs, usability testing and gathering feedback on prototyped solutions) to tailor initiatives to end user's technological needs and capacities. This was particularly important for programme design and incorporating methodologies like human-centred design to understand the needs and incentives to take up initiatives. The literature review noted that engaging with prospective end users early in the design phase was conducive to developing solutions that were better suited to the needs and realities of the target audience.[147] One paper on humanitarian innovation noted that the inclusion of affected populations was the "single most important factor for successful humanitarian innovation."[148]

Knowledge and thought leadership

UNICEF contributed to new knowledge and insights on innovation, notably through its work on Giga, Nodes and the LIH. Giga shared learning through global platforms, including the 2025 Mobile World Congress and the World Bank Digital Summit. Nodes partnerships with academic institutions intended to produce transdisciplinary tools and insights on emerging innovation topics. The PIC shared practices through the Assistive Technology Unit and Humanitarian EdTech Forum (a collaboration between WHO and Médecins Sans Frontières). UNICEF published 20 reports on its innovation website covering themes such as open-source business models, climate finance for young innovators, and the gaming gender gap. UNICEF also participated in UNIN by contributing to working groups, webinars and knowledge exchanges. However, there was limited evidence on how or the extent to which UNICEF influenced wider innovation ecosystems.

UNICEF's approach to innovation showed signs of disrupting traditional sector practices by focusing on initiatives and implementers in underrepresented regions. This was primarily driven by the Venture Fund, which intended to shape innovation markets in the global south. In addition, UNICEF's focus on supporting open-source tools through entities like the Venture Fund and Giga attempted to normalise open-source as a viable business model in the development and humanitarian sector. Tools like the IF Hub's Child-Lens Investing Framework aimed to embed child rights into traditional financing conversations, though whether investors adopt this approach were yet to be seen.

While the final evaluation question focused on disrupting global sector practices, it may be equally valuable for innovation functions to reflect on how they have challenged and reshaped UNICEF's own ways of working, and what impact that has had on the organization. As a change strategy, innovation is more than the sum of its parts. Looking beyond individual initiatives, the goal of innovation has been to elevate all of UNICEF so that innovation is a core part of its operations, enabling continued relevance and playing a leading role in humanitarian and development assistance to deliver impact and accelerate results. Understanding what that means in practice requires clearly defining the goals and results of innovation internally and externally. Doing so would allow UNICEF to assess how innovation affects its organizational culture, systems and norms, and whether it is functioning as a catalyst for sustained and meaningful change.



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5 Conclusions and lessons learned

Conclusions

UNICEF stands at a pivotal moment in its innovation journey. Over the past several years, UNICEF made significant strides in embedding innovation into its strategic planning, building foundational systems, governance, and technical capabilities. However, this progress is now at risk. Restructuring and resource re-distribution under FFI and broader organizational shifts have created both opportunities and vulnerabilities. The evaluation finds that while innovation is increasingly recognized as a driver of results, its strategic focus remains too broad, governance structures are fragmented, and systems for evidence, financial tracking, and accountability are underdeveloped. At the same time, innovation capacity is still concentrated at HQ and a persistent culture of risk aversion further limits bold experimentation. Inclusion, ethics, and child participation are inconsistently applied, and outcomes for children are not routinely tracked. To sustain its innovation momentum and leadership, UNICEF must now consolidate its gains, embed innovation more deeply and equitably across the organization, and invest in the systems, partnerships, and capabilities that will carry innovation from promising pilots to sustainable, system-level impact.

Strategic direction and positioning

Conclusion 1: Innovation as a strategic driver

UNICEF made innovation a core part of its Strategic Planning and how it delivers results for children. Foundational innovation strategies, governance mechanisms, systems, funding streams, and expertise, have been built over the years to deliver innovation. Yet recent organizational restructuring under the Future Focus Initiative places institutional memory and innovation impact at risk. Without continued investment, the momentum in positioning innovation as a change strategy could be lost.

UNICEF has a long and proud history of innovation, from pioneering cold chain technologies to take vaccines to remote areas in the 1970s to deploying digital tools that expand access to education and health, and establishing the DPGA. This record shows that innovation is not a peripheral activity but central to how UNICEF seeks to achieve impact at scale. UNICEF made significant strides in establishing innovation capabilities since the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation in UNICEF's Work, with progress against almost all of the recommendations. Structures, processes, capacities and funding have

been established, particularly at HQ-level. These are important foundational capabilities that position the organization to manage and deliver innovations for children. At the same time, it is important to recognize that innovation is a multi-year, often decade-long, journey. The returns on early investment in systems, partnerships, and ideas may take time to materialize, but premature shifts in priorities and funding cuts risk undermining the progress already made. UNICEF should assess innovation performance over the long term, allowing ideas and capacities the time to mature and demonstrate their full impact for children, rather than abandoning them before they reach scale or sustainability.

Building on this legacy, UNICEF should sharpen its strategic focus to deliver targeted impact.

Conclusion 2: Sharpening strategic focus

UNICEF is entering a new era of limited resources and widening gaps, where success depends on focus and discipline. Moving forward with the next phase of its innovation journey, UNICEF should direct its expertise, flexible funding, and systems toward a smaller set of priorities that deliver the greatest impact for children.

Amid difficult financial decisions being made across the organization, innovation must also move from being everywhere to being focused on a narrow set of priorities. The evaluation found that innovation has been embedded in the Strategic Plans (2018–2021 and 2022–2025) and showed strong alignment with the overarching goal areas and the SDGs. However, ambition often outpaced resources, and weak oversight mechanisms have made it harder to deliver at the critical intersection of digital, data, and innovation, where opportunities and risks for children are greatest. The Strategic Plan 2022–2025 described innovation as a change strategy for addressing 'intractable challenges', but there was insufficient clarity on which intractable challenges to prioritize. Broad areas of work made it difficult for some of the innovation approaches to articulate their relevance and contribution to UNICEF. The new Strategic Plan 2026–2029 positions innovation as an accelerator of outcomes and defines five more targeted Impact Result Areas for UNICEF. This provides an opportunity to define narrower priorities in the Results Areas where innovation can contribute most to results for children.

To support this renewed focus, fragmented management structures should be unified.

Systems for oversight, evidence and investment

Conclusion 3: Governance and oversight

UNICEF's established innovation governance structures should be strengthened and consolidated with digital and data functions to ensure coherence and strategic oversight. Integrating oversight mechanisms, and consequently prioritization, fundraising, and management across innovation, digital, and data will drive more strategic, medium-to long-term impact.

UNICEF made substantial progress in strengthening governance and management systems for innovation through establishing the GIB and ISC. However, the system did not oversee all areas of innovation, particularly at country and regional levels, or in key HQ entities such as ICTD. Irregular meetings, the overlapping mandates of digital and data governance, and the absence of clear distinctions between innovation and digital transformation as change strategies, hindered coherence and (despite efforts to coordinate) relationships between the GIB and Dx Board were weak. The recent repositioning of most innovation capacity within the PG marks a significant turning point in the oversight of innovation. Experience across the sector shows that if innovation becomes fully absorbed into PG structures without a dedicated management system and clear governance, UNICEF risks losing the agility, experimentation, and creativity that have driven its success to date.

It is also important to consolidate governance across digital, data, and innovation, clarify roles and accountabilities, and position the GIB (or a merged GIB/Dx Board) to provide oversight on decisions on innovation priorities and resources. Innovation and digital transformation must be treated as complementary but distinct functions within UNICEF. Clearer separation of accountabilities and mandates are needed to allow digital transformation to strengthen systems using proven technologies through ICTD, while innovation functions focus on exploration, piloting, and acceleration of new solutions.

Effective governance and oversight must be supported by data for decision making.

Conclusion 4: Dataand evidence

Robust evidence is the lifeblood of effective innovation: UNICEF should strengthen its MEL systems for innovation so that the right data for decision-making is available at each stage of the innovation cycle, recognizing that evidence needs vary by stage. Disaggregated outcome-level data, comparative advantage, cost-efficiency and cost effectiveness must be prioritized to demonstrate impact, guide scale-up decisions, and secure long-term buy-in from government partners.

The innovation approaches successfully supported globally scalable solutions, especially DPGs, open-source tools and product innovations. Many initiatives reported impressive reach, with examples such as Giga and the Complementary Feeding Bowl reaching far over one million children. However, reach was the dominant performance measure, and evidence on outcomes and impact for children was limited. Only two of the 16 case study initiatives had independent evaluations, and consolidated outcome data disaggregated by gender, age, or vulnerability was sparse. Internal incentives did not prioritize outcome-level tracking, and there was insufficient funding for evidence generation and learning.

Developing UNICEF's portfolio management requires investing more in data, research, evaluation and knowledge management functions to guide scale-up decisions. Early-stage innovations may require lighter, exploratory data on needs and relevance, while later-stage initiatives demand more robust evidence on cost-effectiveness, outcomes, and scalability. UNICEF's 5D Innovation Framework provides an important foundation for this work and has already informed decision-making around some initiatives, such as the Learning Passport.

Alongside evidence of impact, disciplined financial tracking is essential to guide investments.

Conclusion 5: Financial tracking

UNICEF's proven ability to attract financing for innovation and to organize investments through portfolio management is important groundwork for a more coherent global approach. However, without immediate improvements in financial tracking and data-driven insights, and portfolio stage-gate discipline, UNICEF risks failing to direct resources toward the most effective solutions.

Between 2019 and 2024, UNICEF's innovation spending more than tripled, reaching US$116 million in 2024. This was a testament to the OoI's strong fundraising capacity and reputation for innovation, as well as internal investments through "set aside" funding. Strategic partnerships with donor governments and the private sector enabled further expansion of innovation portfolios, initiatives, and hubs. However, there was no consolidated picture of how more than half of the spending on "innovation" was used especially within ICTD and by COs, and this constrained UNICEF's understanding of risk, opportunity, and the full innovation pipeline.

Portfolio management, a best practice for innovation, provided structure for some of the innovation approaches but could have been more fully implemented especially within T4D and COs to allow innovation managers and COs to assess which innovations to fund, pause, exit, and scale. Learning from peers such as USAID's Development Innovation Ventures (DIV) and private-sector practices highlights how structured portfolio management can be used to balance financial risks and reallocate resources.

As innovation shifts into core programmatic structures, intentional safeguards must also be in place to preserve innovation investments.

Organizational capacity and integrity

Conclusion 6: Integration

Innovation in UNICEF stands at a critical juncture under the new FFI structures. As innovation shifts into core programmatic structures, immediate action is needed to preserve and continue to strengthen its dedicated innovation capacity and knowledge if UNICEF is to retain its innovation relevance, creativity, and agility - alongside core programming. Maintaining innovation systems, earmarking resources, and protecting space for experimentation will be needed to prevent innovation from being diluted by routine delivery.

Until now, innovation at UNICEF has operated largely outside the organization's core structures, and this brought both benefits and challenges. The positioning of the OoI enabled creativity, flexibility, and the ability to test new processes, partnerships, and solutions with greater agility than traditional UNICEF programmes. It also opened space for collaboration with non-traditional partners and exploration of new financing and delivery models. However, separation also created downsides common to innovation units across the sector; limited integration into mainstream systems, weak ownership by programme divisions, uneven oversight mechanisms and accountability, and confusion on innovation's mandate and role. As part of the current organizational restructuring process under the Future Focus Initiative, the OoI has been moved into the PG, ICTD has been moved into the new Digital Impact Division, Giga has been moved into ICTD, the PIC has been dissolved, and additional staff losses are likely.

This moment reflects a familiar pendulum swing seen across similar organizations between keeping innovation as a standalone capability and embedding it within core programmatic lines. The current shift towards integration is understandable and may strengthen alignment with core priorities and mandate and support scaling of successful initiatives. Yet it also risks losing some of the distinctive capacities that enable innovation to thrive: curiosity, experimentation, and tolerance for uncertainty. Experience from across the sector shows that when innovation becomes absorbed into programmatic divisions, organizations often lose creative momentum, divert innovation funding to other programmatic needs, and lower the appetite for risk-taking that drives transformative change. Every structural choice brings trade-offs. UNICEF made decisions on future structures, and should now focus on how to mitigate the known weaknesses of integration to prevent innovation from becoming fully subsumed by 'business as usual' programme delivery. Maintaining dedicated innovation capacity, earmarking resources, and preserving an innovation management system will be essential.

With these imminent changes there is a pressing need to sustain momentum in strengthening institutional structures for knowledge management. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of building improved processes for knowledge management and consolidating and integrating learning from recent years into UNICEF's innovation systems before staff leave. This is needed to ensure that future investments build on an established evidence base rather than duplicating past efforts.

Innovation capabilities must also extend beyond HQ to a greater range of staff.

Conclusion 7: Capabilities

UNICEF's significant progress in strengthening innovation structures, processes and technical capacities, particularly at HQ, should be maintained through FFI and extended closer to country operations. Without capacity in the newly created Centres of Excellence (CoEs) and COs, UNICEF lacks the ability to contextualize and sustain innovations and to engage strategically with governments, the private sector, and other national partners on frontier technology.

Portfolio management is a recognized best practice for innovation and was one of three overarching recommendations in the 2019 Evaluation of Innovation in UNICEF's Work. The use of portfolio management, Stage Gates (in PIC) and the 5D Innovation Framework (at the OoI) have brought greater coherence to innovation at UNICEF. However, the systems to implement portfolio management are held in HQ and capacities are unevenly embedded across regions and COs. With only 6 per cent of COs having dedicated innovation staff, progress on innovation has relied heavily on individual leadership, skillsets, and access to resources. Offices with supportive management and resources tended to innovate more effectively, while others lacked the capacity or incentives to do so.

The multitude of ideas and pilots documented in the INVENT platform, along with active staff engagement through SPARK, illustrate that there is no shortage of ideas, but rather a lack of systems to manage a

pipeline of innovations arising in COs. As a decentralized organization, UNICEF will need to rebalance innovation capacity closer to operations, ensuring stronger discipline, strategic alignment, and visibility for innovations developed at the country level. At the same time, interviews repeatedly highlighted that many COs lack the expertise to engage strategically with governments, the private sector, and other partners on the risks and opportunities of digital innovation for children. This represents a critical gap for UNICEF's ability to remain a trusted and influential actor in advancing and protecting children's rights in an increasingly digital world. Stronger CoE and CO innovation capacity could help address this gap.

As innovation capacity and reach expand, it must be guided by principles that ensure no child is left behind.

Conclusion 8: Equity, inclusion and child participation

UNICEF's innovation efforts have not consistently prioritized equity, gender, disability inclusion, or child participation. While some initiatives targeted marginalized groups, most lacked clear objectives, disaggregated data, or mechanisms to measure inclusive impact. This risks UNICEF's mission of leaving no child behind.

Several approaches and initiatives were designed to promote inclusion. For example, innovations like Oky and ADTs targeted girls and children with disabilities. Overall, there was not a clear strategic approach for how to manage the trade-off between supporting innovations with broad global scale and delivering deep impact for a specific marginalized group. Similarly, while some initiatives used child-centered and participatory design methods, there was no consistent approach to including particular groups of vulnerable children in the design of innovations.

Overall, inclusion has been implicit rather than systematic. Where equity objectives existed, they were rarely explicit or measured, and most initiatives did not consistently disaggregate data by gender, disability, or other equity markers. Equity is integral to UNICEF's legitimacy and must be embedded as a non-negotiable principle for innovation. This means ensuring that inclusion is systematically integrated into design, measurement, and prioritization processes, and that innovation teams are supported to navigate the real trade-offs between designing for scale and ensuring inclusion.

This requires ethical safeguards to ensure accountability.

Conclusion 9: Ethics and safeguards

Safeguards to prevent harm and uphold child rights have not been consistently embedded in innovation processes. Some offices avoided risk altogether, while others took risks without adequate ethical oversight. UNICEF should intentionally embed equity, ethics, and child participation into every innovation.

At the same time, formal safeguards to prevent or address potential negative impacts of innovation on children were not consistently embedded in risk assessment and decision-making. This created a paradox: some offices engaged in too little calculated risk-taking to drive meaningful innovation, while others took risks without sufficient systems to ensure they were ethically managed.

With ethical safeguards in place, UNICEF will also be better positioned to foster a culture that embraces risk and learning.

Conclusion 10: Culture

In a rapidly evolving context that demands bold action, persistent risk aversion in some parts of UNICEF threatens its ability to innovate for children. Cultural and system-level shifts are needed to encourage experimentation and learning from failure.

UNICEF took significant risks in several of its innovation investments and pilots, and overall staff reported openness to new ideas. Yet concerns around financial and reputational risk werea barrier to bold innovation and learning from failure in many offices. Only 26 per cent of staff reported a high tolerance for risk-taking in their offices, and just 28 per cent agreed that failure was welcomed as a learning opportunity. Instances of failure were rarely documented or shared, limiting institutional learning and the ability to adapt. While risk management tools such as the Ambition Matrix existed, they were largely underutilized outside the OoI. Innovation was often perceived as reputationally risky, particularly for managers, and this perception was reinforced by rigid procurement and partnership systems that constrained experimentation.

Partnerships are key to sustaining momentum and reaching scale.

Pathways to sustainability and scale

Conclusion 11: Partnerships

UNICEF cultivated a diverse set of innovation partnerships, yet these relationships remain underdeveloped at country level and are too often transactional or short-term, limiting their potential to deliver sustained, child-focused impact.

Complex challenges cannot be solved in isolation, and sustained innovation depends on collaboration that combines diverse expertise, resources, and perspectives. UNICEF has played a leading role in shaping global digital norms, co-founding the DPGA and influencing the Global Digital Compact. Flagship initiatives such as Giga leveraged UNICEF's reputation to build partnerships with private sector actors, governments, and academia.

However, most external partners were engaged as funders or service providers rather than as co-creators or long-term allies, limiting UNICEF's ability to scale and sustain innovations beyond its own structures. Several private sector partners expressed frustration with slow and complex procurement processes and highlighted the need for more strategic, value-driven collaboration beyond transactional funding. At the country level, partnerships remained underdeveloped, with many COs seeking stronger engagement with global partners. Promising models such as the PIC's open-innovation mechanisms and academic collaborations through the Nodes demonstrate potential. Building on these examples, UNICEF can formalize partnership frameworks and governance models that foster long-term collaboration, leverage co-financing, and strengthen sustainability at scale.

Scaling must be intentional and system-oriented to deliver lasting impact.

Conclusion 12: Scaling and system level impact

UNICEF's commitment to scaling innovation has positioned it ahead of peers and is key to accelerating results for children. Without investment in the Acceleration and Transition to Scale stages, innovation initiatives often struggle to sustain.

UNICEF has shown strong commitment to scaling innovation, investing significant resources to help promising ideas move from pilots to wider implementation. This focus on the "missing middle" of innovation positioned UNICEF ahead of many peers and enabled nine of the sixteen case study initiatives to operate in multiple countries. These successes demonstrate UNICEF's potential to move innovations beyond experimentation and deliver results at scale. Yet, scale is difficult and often costly. For most initiatives, available support was not sufficient to ensure sustainable, system-level integration, leaving them heavily dependent on UNICEF resources and internal champions. Private sector and government financing was mostly not sustained.

While teams consistently reported consulting stakeholders, few were able to fully assess demand for new innovations or the willingness and capacity of partners to sustain them. As a result, once UNICEF's direct support ended, many initiatives struggled to maintain momentum. To sustain credibility and continued investment in innovation, UNICEF must continue to invest in the Acceleration and Transition to Scale stages of the cycle. Donors and senior leadership are unlikely to continue supporting expensive innovation structures that cannot clearly demonstrate how they are scaling - a challenge that has already led to the closure of other global innovation initiatives. This means strengthening business model development, mapping pathways to scale beyond UNICEF's own structures, and deepening partnerships with governments and the private sector to share responsibility for long-term delivery and impact.

Lessons learned

Lesson 1: Systematic and consistent evidence generation has significant potential for demonstrating the value and impact of UNICEF's innovation work, including what can be learned from it. Experience from UNICEF's innovation efforts demonstrated that prioritising monitoring, evaluation and learning activities is critical for understanding what UNICEF is achieving, the comparative advantage of initiatives over traditional approaches and lessons that can be applied to future initiatives. This data would enable UNICEF to substantiate its results, increasing its credibility in the sector and the chance to further showcase its work.

Lesson 2: Formalising innovation structures and capacities at HQ was a critical step for institutionalising innovation at UNICEF. However, the lack of these resources and skills at RO and CO levels limited unlocking innovation's full potential on the ground. Building local innovation capacity and structures is particularly important at the country level since this is where most initiatives are implemented and local staff are key to identifying how they may be scaled.

Lesson 3: Different types of innovation followed distinct pathways toward scale requiring tailored approaches. For example, product innovations within the PIC often scaled through integration into the UNCIEF supply chain, while digital solutions depended more on government adoption and infrastructure. Some innovations progressed through all stages of the innovation cycle but others did not follow this sequence; for instance at the PIC, if a suitable product already existed, R&D might be skipped and the initiative moved directly to Validation. These differences underscored the need for early, context-specific planning around scale, including financing, delivery models, and institutional ownership. Embedding scale considerations from the outset (aligned to the innovation type and operating environment) was critical to increasing the likelihood of sustainable impact at scale.

Lesson 4: A strong focus on early-stage development sometimes came at the expense of building on existing solutions or learning from others in the ecosystem. For example, digital menstrual health app Oky was launched in 2018, when the OoI said that few comparable tools existed. However, by 2025, similar tools had been implemented in other contexts, and interviewees raised concerns about duplication, cost-effectiveness, and limited value-add. These examples highlighted the need for **UNICEF to regularly assess market fit, cost-effectiveness, and the need to pivot or discontinue investments.** As innovations mature, new entrants often introduce faster or better solutions and **sunk-cost bias can hinder timely decisions to pivot or exit.** Regularly assessing the evolving ecosystem aligns with the Principles for Digital Development (co-created by UNICEF) which call for reuse, collaboration, and designing with scale in mind.



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6 Recommendations

To sustain UNICEF's innovation momentum in a context of shrinking resources and ongoing restructuring—and to support the transition to innovation maturity—the evaluation presents five interlinked and critical recommendations that chart a path forward. **First**, UNICEF must sharpen and enforce a narrower set of innovation priorities aligned with the Strategic Plan 2026–2029 to ensure innovation accelerates measurable results for children. **Second**, it must maintain and strengthen its innovation management system to provide strategic oversight, while improving visibility into innovation investments and results to guide smarter, evidence-based decisions. **Third**, UNICEF must embed ethical guardrails, equity, inclusion, and child participation as non-negotiable principles across all innovation processes. **Fourth**, it must continue investing in the Acceleration and Transition to Scale stages to ensure that promising innovations achieve sustainable impact. **Fifth**, UNICEF must strengthen and sustain strategic, long-term partnerships—particularly at the decentralized level—to support co-creation, co-financing, and the long-term sustainability of innovation.

These areas represent good practices in organizational innovation, align with the Innovation Management Standard (ISO 56002), and will be key to sustaining UNICEF's value in innovation and translating it into measurable results for children. Together, these recommendations aim to protect and evolve UNICEF's innovation capability—ensuring it remains a bold, ethical, and effective force for children in a rapidly changing world.

Strategic direction and positioning

Recommendation 1: UNICEF should sharpen and narrow its innovation priorities, aligned with the Impact Result Areas of the Strategic Plan 2026–2029 to target solutions that accelerate measurable results for children.

- **Prioritization:** High
- **Timeframe:** 6 months
- **Responsibility:** GIB, Dx Board, CoEs, OoI
- **Supporting units/divisions:** DID, GPD, OSE, PFP, SD, ROs and COs
- **Cost implications:** Low

Rationale: UNICEF's broad innovation portfolios have diluted impact and limit the organization's ability to concentrate resources where they can accelerate measurable outcomes for children. Narrowing priorities, promoting coherence between global and country-level priorities, and aligning innovation efforts with the Strategic Plan's Impact Result Areas will strengthen coherence and enable more strategic investment.

UNICEF should:

- **Develop a unifying Theory of Change for Innovation** that sets out clear objectives and articulates where innovation can add most value in delivering quantifiable progress towards the five impact areas in the Strategic Plan 2026–2029 (Key finding 2). It should include key measures of success for innovation portfolios.
- **Define narrower thematic priorities for innovation aligned with the Strategic Plan 2026–2029's Impact Results Areas** (Key finding 2). UNICEF should apply a strategic filter to identify where innovation can add the most value. These priorities should be approved by the GIB and clearly articulate what UNICEF will and will not pursue through innovation. For example, OoI should clarify where innovation can add most value in delivering quantifiable progress towards the five Impact Result areas in the Strategic Plan 2026–2029. Data suggests UNICEF's innovation could most strongly contribute to Impact Result Area 1 (Health/Nutrition) and 2 (Learning/Skills), where evidence of scale, measurable outcomes, and systems integration is strongest. The updated priorities should articulate narrower focus areas (e.g. not just "learning crisis" but specific sub-issues) to inform its investment decisions. These focus areas should be approved by the GIB. Similarly, it should define what UNICEF will not pursue through innovation, thereby sharpening the strategic focus. DID should also specify narrow priorities for how its spending under the GIC is used.
- **Ensure decentralized innovation investments, especially digital innovations, are strategically focused to ensure coherence and maximize results for children**. COs and CoEs should be encouraged to identify one innovation priority from the Strategic Plan's five impact results and focus innovation spending and activities in support of that result. To support this, innovation should be integrated into Rights and Results Programming (RRP) training to ensure it is contextualized and considered as an accelerator of results in the preparation of Country Programme Documents and embedded in programme design.
- **Conduct a robust review of all investments in the *Accelerate* and *Transition to Scale* stages of the Innovation Cycle (ie those with largest financial investments) to ensure alignment with new priorities** (Key findings 15, 25, 34). The GIB should assess whether these innovations align to the sharpened Impact Results Areas and are delivering measurable outcomes for children. The GIB should recommend reallocation or discontinuation of initiatives where necessary. This review is a one-time, strategic exercise, distinct from ongoing monitoring and data collection under Recommendation 3.3.
- **Launch an internal innovation engagement and communication strategy** (Key finding 32). This should focus on strengthening the shared understanding and ownership of innovation by highlighting investments, successes, and contributions to divisional and organizational strategies and achievements.

Systems for oversight, evidence and investment

Recommendation 2: UNICEF should maintain and strengthen its innovation management system during the ongoing restructuring to ensure strategic oversight, maintain institutional capability, and enable innovation across the organization.

Prioritization: High

Timeframe: 24 months

Responsibility: GIB, OoI, DID, SD, CoEs

Supporting units/divisions: GPD, OSE, DFAM, DPC, ROs and COs

Cost implications: High

Rationale: Innovation requires distinct methodologies, governance, and strategic intent, and should be supported through dedicated structures that collaborate with DID, GPD, SD and decentralized offices. UNICEF's restructuring has reduced and repositioned its innovation capacity, creating a risk that hard-won systems, expertise, and institutional memory could be lost. Maintaining and strengthening a dedicated innovation management system is essential to preserve institutional capability, sustain creativity, and ensure innovation continues to accelerate results for children.

UNICEF should:

- **Maintain a structure for innovation with dedicated expertise in innovation technical support, portfolio management, data, monitoring, evaluation and learning**(Key findings 1, 4, 29, 30). This includes preserving institutional capabilities developed under the OoI and PIC, and ensuring continuity of innovation processes through UNICEF's new quadrennium and FFI process.The distinct but complementary roles of innovation functions and DID should be clarified and communicated, with innovation functions ensuring strategic alignment and coherence, and digital transformation focusing on mainstreaming proven technologies and systems.
- **Use the GIB to provide more strategic oversight of innovation** (Key finding 3). Innovation capabilities have been cut, restructured, and repositioned and a stronger Innovation Management System supported by the GIB would help support innovation capacities within new structures. This should include building on the processes developed under OoI and PIC for consistent portfolio and stage-gate management (see Recommendation 3 below). A revised Terms of Reference should clarify the GIB's synergies with the Dx Board and other governance bodies.
- **Rebalance the distribution of dedicated innovation staff beyond HQ to increase capacity closer to where innovations are being tested and implemented in CoEs and COs** (Key findings 8 and 29). Focus on offices that have a track record for innovation (including embedding innovations in government) and where there is high demand for innovation support and capacity building to lead and scale innovations more effectively. Position CoEs as the natural homes for innovation expertise in thematic areas. Recruitment should build capabilities in CoEs and COs to engage Governments and private sector counterparts on opportunities and risks to children of innovation and emerging technologies.
- **Strengthen CO and CoE skills for engagement on emerging technologies and children's rights** (Key findings 4, 11, 29). Partner with DPC to develop a skills-based approach to staffing that prioritizes the capabilities needed for COs and ROs to engage effectively with governments, private sector, and other stakeholders on emerging technologies and the rights of children. Mapping existing innovation skills across UNICEF should inform targeted capacity-building efforts to close gaps and ensure COs can develop and represent UNICEF's position credibly and strategically in these evolving areas. This should include upskilling of senior leaders in CO and CoEs to be able to communicate with senior leaders of potential partners (including governments, private sector, academia).
- **Build innovation management capabilities in COs** through expanding demand-led access to COMPASS for CoEs and COs alongside support and coaching in portfolio management using the 5D Framework, with contextual adaptation (Key findings 8 and 29). Develop an innovation "champions" cohort at CoE and CO levels (similar to ethics champions).
- **As a priority, document institutional knowledge before the loss of staff associated with UNICEF's restructuring through FFI** (Key finding 29). This includes capturing knowledge on recent investments in product innovation, stage-gate processes, and procurement for innovation. Ownership for maintaining and curating this knowledge should be clearly assigned. Special attention should be given to capturing knowledge on product innovation in close triangulation with GPD and SD.

Recommendation 3: UNICEF should strengthen the traceability of its innovation investments and results to better guide investment and stage gate decisions and ensure innovations are effective and efficient before Transition to Scale.

Prioritization: High

Timeframe: 6 months

Responsibility: OoI, DID

Supporting units/divisions: OSE, EO, CoEs, DFAM, SD

Cost implications: Moderate

Rationale: UNICEF's innovation investments have grown substantially, yet limited visibility over how funds are used and what outcomes they deliver constrains accountability and strategic decision-making. Strengthening financial tracking and outcome measurement will enable UNICEF to understand where innovation resources are going and ensure investments are directed toward the highest-impact solutions for children.

UNICEF should:

- **Improve financial tracking of innovation across UNICEF** (Key findings 6). Establish a mechanism for tracking innovation expenditure at all levels. This includes updating Vision codes to improve tracking of innovation spending at HQ, CoEs and COs (regardless of funding source or managing entity). It also involves ensuring better integration between innovation dashboards and financial data. The outcome should be that UNICEF understands where it is spending on innovation, and portfolio managers have an accurate picture of the most significant investments.
- **Embed systems and processes for knowledge management on innovations in DID and CoEs to ensure documentation, sharing, and learning of funded initiatives**. This may include updating INVENT to be a more accurate, real-time picture of innovations being actively funded and supported in COs.
- **Collect outcomes and cost-efficiency data more systematically, especially to guide decisions at the Accelerate and Transition to Scale** stages (Key finding 16, 22, 26, 30). Integrate innovation into organizational MEL guidance, defining requirements for outcome-level evidence as innovations transition to scale. Routinely include budgets, PME Officer time, and CO accountabilities for measuring outcomes and cost-efficiency as part of innovation funding. Align MEL with the Innovation Standard ISO 56002; monitoring should consider not only outputs (e.g., number of innovations delivered) but also outcomes (e.g. children in underserved areas regularly accessing quality learning content), and impacts (e.g., literacy levels). Assessment of the comparative advantage of innovations over other solutions should also be conducted at the pilot stage to ensure resources are prioritized effectively. Independent impact evaluations should be routinely considered at the Accelerate stage, using approaches aligned with the UNICEF's 2023 Evaluation Policy and reflected in fundraising strategies. Outcome data on priority innovation investments should be shared with the GIB, enabling it to track progress against priorities.
- **Assess comparative advantage early** in the innovation cycle, ensuring that resources are prioritized for solutions that outperform alternatives.This includes collecting cost-efficiency data and assessing value for money from the pilot stage onward.

Organizational capacity and integrity

Recommendation 4: UNICEF should systematically integrate ethical safeguards, equity, inclusion and child participation across innovation processes to uphold child rights and ensure safe and inclusive outcomes for all children.

Prioritization: Moderate

Timeframe: 12 months

Responsibility: OoI, CoEs

Supporting units/divisions: OSE, DID, SD, PFP, ROs and COs

Cost implications: Low/Moderate

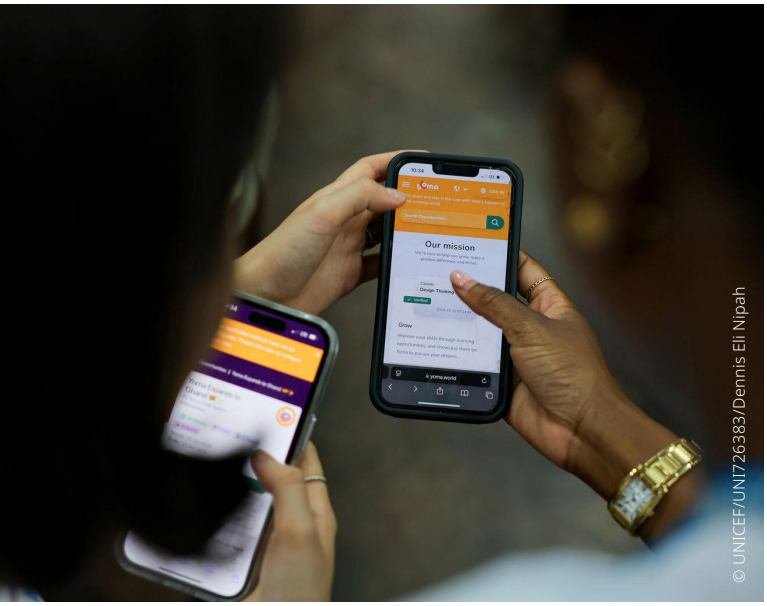
Rationale: UNICEF's innovation efforts have not yet embedded consistent safeguards to prevent harm or ensure equity, and inclusion has often been implicit rather than systematic. Establishing clear ethical guardrails, child participation standards, and accountability for inclusive design will help UNICEF balance necessary risk-taking with its core obligation to do no harm, uphold child safeguarding, and ensure equity.

UNICEF should:

- **Embed inclusion and child participation as core requirements for innovation teams, especially in digital innovation** (Key findings 36, 37). Make child participation a criterion for all innovations progressing through the Acceleration stage and beyond. Innovation teams should be required to demonstrate the use of child-centred, participatory, and inclusive design approaches, collect disaggregated data by gender, disability, and other equity markers, and articulate explicit equity outcomes as part of their business and scaling models. Training should continue to strengthen these capabilities, drawing on lessons from initiatives such as Oky and ADTs and methodologies from partners like LEGO. Training should also build capacity to fully follow the Digital Design Principles (UNICEF is a signatory) and consider digital exclusion.
- **Require innovation initiatives to collect and reportdisaggregated databy gender, disability, and other relevant equity markers** (Key finding 24). Innovation monitoring, evaluation and decision-making must ensure innovations achieve equitable outcomes and results for all children,

including girls; children in poor households and marginalized communities; children with disabilities; migrant, refugee and displaced children; children in different age groups and school levels; children in both urban and rural areas; and children affected by humanitarian crises.

- **Establish a dedicated ethics review mechanism tailored to innovation initiatives, especially those involving emerging technologies, children and vulnerable populations** (Key finding 10). The 5D Framework includes a 'do no harm' approach; however, it is quite vague about what this means in practice. UNICEF should create innovation ethics guidelines to ensure all innovation activities, particularly those using emerging technologies and that involve piloting with vulnerable groups, are assessed adequately. A new ethics review mechanism should be established and resourced to review key innovation initiatives and aligned with broader digital governance structures to avoid siloed approaches and ensure coherence across UNICEF's programming. This will ensure that risk appetite does not override commitments to child rights, gender equality, and inclusion.
- **Strengthen ethical and data governance in partnerships involving emerging technologies, including AI/ML** (Key findings 7 and 35). Engage UNICEF's Chief of AI and the Senior Adviser for ethics in evidence generation, or equivalent institutional expertise, at an early stage to ensure that data governance and rights (including ownership, access, processing, retention, privacy, and protection) are clearly defined in contractual arrangements.



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Pathways to sustainability and scale

Recommendation 5: UNICEF should continue to invest in scaling innovations that demonstrate evidence-based promise or proven results, supporting their Acceleration, Transition to Scale and sustainable delivery through partnerships, business models and systems integration.

Prioritization: Moderate

Timeframe: 24 months

Responsibility: OoI, CoEs

Supporting units/divisions: OSE, PFP, PDP, SD, GCA, ROs and COs

Cost implications: Moderate/high

Rationale: Scaling innovation is critical to delivering measurable outcomes for children, yet many initiatives remain dependent on UNICEF resources and lack sustainable pathways beyond the organization. Continued investment in the Acceleration and Transition to Scale stages is essential to achieve lasting, system-level impact and maintaining donor confidence in UNICEF's innovation leadership.

UNICEF should:

- **Better define what scale means for UNICEF,** emphasizing sustainability, systems integration, and most importantly, impact. Scaling should be understood not only as reach, replication and expansion, but as embedding innovations into national systems and core programming.
- **Ensure that all innovations undergo business model design and testing during proof of concept** (Key findings 18, 19, 27, 33). Innovations supported to Transition to Scale should demonstrate a viable business model, while those that graduate from Transition to Scale should have a fully tested, sustainable, and scalable business model. The business model should draw upon cost-efficiency data generated at earlier stages of the innovation cycle (recommendation 3).
- **Work with PFP and PDP to define clear partnership typologies, frameworks and processes for innovationpartnerships** (Key finding 7).Differentiate funding, implementing, and co-creation partnerships, and provide guidance on how UNICEF implements structures such as Public-Private Partnerships, Joint Ventures, and Build-Operate-Transfer approaches

for innovation. This should include defining an approach to engaging donors and partners in ways that support long-term scaling, as well as document practices and successes for working with partners and suppliers from PIC and Nodes. Aim to make partnership arrangements for smaller partners and suppliers (e.g., start-ups, CSOs, Refugee-Led Organizations) more equitable addressing issues related to the speed of procurement and payment terms.

- **Test and document pathways to scale beyond UNICEF, including potential adoption by governments, private sector actors, and civil society organizations** (Key findings 18, 19, 27, 33). Develop guidance and training to support teams in using these external scaling strategies effectively. This would include guidance on how UNICEF implements structures such as Public-Private Partnerships, Joint Ventures, and Build-Operate-Transfer approaches for innovation. Document practices and successes from PIC and Nodes.
- **Advocate with host governments to secure budget allocation for innovations ready for scale but not yet prioritized by government, leveraging the Resident Coordinator (RC) and CO leadership** (Key findings 18, 19, 27, 33). This should include presenting evidence of effectiveness, cost-efficiency, and potential impact as well as possible co-financing arrangements. Upskilling of senior CO leadership should support this process (Recommendation 2).

Additional considerations

The recommendations have focused on the changes that are most fundamental to strengthening the foundations for innovation at UNICEF. However, a wider set of issues and actions remain important for UNICEF to return to once foundational systems are strengthened. Areas for further consideration include:

- Implementing a risk-impact model for portfolio management, drawing on models such as USAID Development Innovation Ventures to guide resource allocation.
- Implementing portfolio management practices for innovation across COs and CoEs.
- Increasing global visibility of RO and CO initiatives from the proof-of-concept stage onward and establishing pathways for supporting strategic and impactful RO and CO innovations.
- Reviewing procurement barriers to innovation.
- Establishing a risk-opportunity balance tool to clarify acceptable risk in innovation.
- Embedding learning from failure through structured mechanisms and communications.

List of Annexes

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1.2. Innovation Theory of Change

1.3. Stakeholder mapping

1.4. Innovation functions at UNICEF

Annex 2. Additional Information on Methods

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2.2. Benchmark and frameworks

2.3. Survey response summary, analysis, and index methodology

2.4. Document and systematic review (n=541)

2.5. List of people consulted (n=276)

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3.1. Matrix of documented progress against recommendations from the 2019 evaluation of innovation in UNICEF work

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Annex 5. Tables referenced in innovation initiatives

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5.2. Overview of case study initiative outcomes by ALNAP innovation outcomes

5.3. Relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of innovation initiatives

Annex 6. Regional thematic case studies

Annex 7. Biographies of the evaluation team

Endnotes

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109 The 5D Innovation Framework states that causality should be established in order for innovations to enter the Transition to Scale stage but hasn't yet been operationalised
110 The INVENT database included three improvement categories: 1) improved tool or approach to a new target group or population; 2.) significant improvement on ability to deliver (e.g. faster or cheaper than alternatives); and 3.) entirely new tools or approaches. About half of the improved innovations were classified as one the first two groups, whilst a third also fit into the last category. However, further information on outcome-level results was limited and it was not possible to identify sources of evidence. For instance, achievements and progress were described qualitatively, with a focus on activities completed and numbers reached rather than demonstrating improvements over alternative solutions.
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