



# **Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education (2018-2023)**

Lesotho country report

# Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education (2018-2023) - Lesotho country report

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## Preface

Over the years, UNICEF has played a key role in setting the agenda on early childhood development (ECD) and early childhood education (ECE), keeping the child rights agenda at the forefront of discussion and targeting the most vulnerable children. During the last three strategic planning periods (2014-2017, 2018-2021 and 2022-2025), UNICEF made notable investments in advocating for the right of children to thrive and learn in their *early moments of life*, supporting countries to develop investment cases and recognize and strengthen systems to achieve universal coverage of ECD/ECE. UNICEF partnered with other United Nations agencies to develop the *Nurturing Care Framework* which outlines the conceptual underpinnings for delivering ECD services for children aged 0-8 years and spearheaded the development of the *Build to Last Framework*, a systemic vision to ensure long-term sustainability of ECE to support national efforts to provide equitable, high-quality pre-primary education.

I would like to acknowledge – with sincere gratitude – the participation and support accorded to the evaluation team, Pamela Wridt (Team Leader), Kerrie Proulx, Michela Profeta, Abdullah Alam, Martin Galevski and Nicolas D’Azevedo. I also would like to recognize colleagues in the headquarters ECD/ECE programme team, the UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO), and Lesotho Country Office (LCO) that very adeptly and helpfully supported the evaluation, as well as ESARO and LCO who generously gave their time to organize and participate in several meetings and workshops. I would like to sincerely thank our evaluation management team members, Kathleen Letshabo, Jayachandran Vasudevan as well as Adrian Shikwe and Denis Jobin for their overall supervision and leadership in managing this process to completion.

The evaluation findings and conclusions presented in this report aim to enhance organizational learning, strengthen organizational accountability and improve programmes and policies around ECD and ECE.

The evaluation shows that the LCO significantly contributed to ECD policies and systems, and these contributions indicate that UNICEF made an effective case for investing in ECD and *why* ECD matters as a strong catalyst for realizing national and global Sustainable Development Goals. This evaluation also shows that UNICEF has advanced *how* to implement holistic ECD services through a range of *integrated approaches*.

I hope you will find this report’s analyses and findings insightful, incisive, and useful.

**Robert McCouch**  
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# Abbreviations

|                 |                                                 |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <b>AIDS</b>     | Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome              |
| <b>BELDS</b>    | Better Early Learning at Scale                  |
| <b>CBO</b>      | Community-Based Organization                    |
| <b>COAR</b>     | Country Office Annual Report                    |
| <b>COVID-19</b> | Coronavirus Disease                             |
| <b>CPD</b>      | Country Programme Documents                     |
| <b>CRS</b>      | Catholic Relief Service                         |
| <b>CSO</b>      | Civil Society Organization                      |
| <b>FGD</b>      | Focus Group Discussion                          |
| <b>ECD</b>      | Early Childhood Development                     |
| <b>ECCD</b>     | Early Childhood Care and Development            |
| <b>ECE</b>      | Early Childhood Education                       |
| <b>EMIS</b>     | Education Management Information Systems        |
| <b>EQ</b>       | Evaluation Question                             |
| <b>ESARO</b>    | Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office     |
| <b>GoL</b>      | Government of Lesotho                           |
| <b>GPE</b>      | Global Partnership for Education                |
| <b>HIV</b>      | Human Immunodeficiency Virus                    |
| <b>IECCD</b>    | Integrated Early Childhood Care and Development |
| <b>iNGO</b>     | International Non-Governmental Organization     |
| <b>KII</b>      | Key Informant Interview                         |
| <b>KIX</b>      | Knowledge Innovation Exchange                   |
| <b>KPI</b>      | Key Performance Indicator                       |

|                |                                                                  |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>LCO</b>     | Lesotho Country Office                                           |
| <b>LNFO</b>    | Lesotho National Federation of Organisations of the Disabled     |
| <b>LNOb</b>    | Leave No One Behind                                              |
| <b>MICS</b>    | Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey                                |
| <b>MoET</b>    | Ministry of Education and Training                               |
| <b>MoGYSD</b>  | Ministry of Gender, Youth and Social Development                 |
| <b>M&amp;E</b> | Monitoring and Evaluation                                        |
| <b>NCF</b>     | Nurturing Care Framework                                         |
| <b>NECDOL</b>  | Network of Early Childhood Development of Lesotho                |
| <b>NGO</b>     | Non-Governmental Organization                                    |
| <b>OVC</b>     | Orphans and Vulnerable Children                                  |
| <b>RFF</b>     | Roger Federer Foundation                                         |
| <b>SBC</b>     | Social Behaviour Change                                          |
| <b>SDG</b>     | Sustainable Development Goal                                     |
| <b>SP</b>      | Strategic Plan                                                   |
| <b>ToC</b>     | Theory of Change                                                 |
| <b>ToR</b>     | Terms of Reference                                               |
| <b>UN</b>      | United Nations                                                   |
| <b>UNEG</b>    | United Nations Evaluation Group                                  |
| <b>UNESCO</b>  | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| <b>UNICEF</b>  | United Nations Children's Fund                                   |
| <b>WASH</b>    | Water, Sanitation and Hygiene                                    |
| <b>WHO</b>     | World Health Organization                                        |

## Glossary

In this report, the following key concepts and terms are utilized and defined in the table below.

| Concept/Term                       | Definition/description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Source                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Early childhood development</b> | Early childhood development (ECD) refers to the holistic and multidimensional development of a child from prenatal stage to age eight years. The essential elements for healthy ECD include health care, adequate nutrition, protection, responsive caregiving and early learning opportunities. UNICEF considers ECD an outcome of its work across the sectors.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <a href="#">UNICEF</a>                                                                    |
| <b>Early childhood education</b>   | Early childhood education (ECE) provides learning and educational activities with a holistic approach to support children's early cognitive, physical, social and emotional development and introduces young children to organized instruction outside of the family context to develop some of the skills needed for academic readiness and prepare them for entry into primary education. Within the framework of the International Standard Classification of Education 2011, it includes ECE development and pre-primary education. The former has educational content designed for younger children (aged 0-2 years), while the latter is designed for children from age three years to the start of primary education. | <a href="#">United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)</a> |
| <b>Early childhood stimulation</b> | The interaction between young children and their caregivers, providing children with the opportunity to learn about their environment from the earliest age. In practice, stimulation is about parents and other caregivers being responsive to the emotional and physical needs of their children from birth onward, playing and talking with them (even before children can respond verbally), and exposing them to words, numbers, and simple concepts while engaging in daily routines.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <a href="#">Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies</a>                         |
| <b>Early learning</b>              | Opportunities for early learning refers to any opportunity for the infant or child to interact with a person, place, or object in their environment. Recognizes that every interaction (positive or negative, or absence of an interaction) is contributing to the child's brain development and laying the foundation for later learning.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <a href="#">World Health Organization</a>                                                 |

|                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                         |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <b>Integrated ECD approach<sup>1</sup></b> | An approach that seeks to build cross-sectoral coordination systems to deliver a combination of services from different sectors through one channel, which can be independent of service sectors or delivered via one sector but are provided to the same child. A set of ECD services delivered via integrated or coordinated mechanisms, addressing the full range of needed services for the child across different ECD phases (prenatal, 0-6 months, 6 months-3 years, and 3-6 years) as well different sectors (health, nutrition, child development and education, and protection). | <a href="#">World Bank</a>              |
| <b>School readiness</b>                    | Refers to the desired outcomes of a strong pre-primary subsector, including children's physical well-being, social and emotional competence, and cognitive and communication abilities, as well as children's overall curiosity and motivation to learn, often referred to as school readiness skills.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <a href="#">Build to Last Framework</a> |

1 It is important to note that the initial definition utilized in the evaluation for “integrated ECD approach” was taken from the World Bank because this term was not found in UNICEF programme literature or documents. Because this term was in the Terms of Reference, it had to be defined by the evaluation team to be operationalized for the evaluation. Through the evaluation, it was discovered that the term “integrated ECD approach” was not defined in a consistent manner among key informants, but using a contribution analysis of all evaluation data, the evaluation was able to identify a typology of integration approaches.



## Executive summary

This evaluation report summarizes the methodology and findings for Lesotho on UNICEF work in [early childhood development](#) (ECD) and [early childhood education](#) (ECE) from 2018 to 2023. This country report was derived from a larger global evaluation on UNICEF work in ECD and ECE that was commissioned by the UNICEF Evaluation Office. As part of this effort, the UNICEF Lesotho Country Office (LCO) benefited from an independent team of evaluation consultants with expertise in ECD and ECE by examining their country case in greater detail. The evaluation design and its implementation were guided by the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the global evaluation, and through inputs from the LCO.

The purpose of this evaluation was to support organizational learning and accountability for UNICEF investments in ECD and ECE work from 2018 to 2023. On the learning side, the evaluation investigated the extent to which UNICEF has leveraged organizational investments in the integrated ECD approach and used its knowledge, resources, and experiences to support countries in strengthening their national ECD and ECE programmes. The evaluation also examined UNICEF achievement of results aimed at increasing access to ECE and care opportunities for accountability purposes.

Evidence from the evaluation was designed to facilitate decision-making, advocacy, and resource mobilization, and contribute to global, regional, and national learning within the ECD and the ECE sub-sector. The primary audience for this evaluation is LCO, including leadership and ECD, education, health, and nutrition teams at every level, responsible for the strategic choices of education programming and reporting within the organization. A secondary internal audience for the evaluation includes other UNICEF focal points that collaborate and coordinate with education programmes and the ECD cross-cutting programmes (such as child protection, nutrition, health, social policy).

The Lesotho evaluation was national in scope, and focused on the relationship between the multisectoral, integrated ECD approach and school readiness. The evaluation examined all Goal Areas to assess UNICEF work in ECD and ECE from 2018 to 2023, with a focus on the most marginalized children aged 0-8 years.

The evaluation was theory-based to assess UNICEF contributions and results for young children and their parents/caregivers from 2018 to 2023. Mixed methods were used to gather quantitative and qualitative data through primary and secondary data collection procedures. A total of 131 participants were engaged

in the evaluation in Lesotho (90 per cent women), including seven UNICEF staff members, 13 government partners, 19 implementing partners, 29 front-line workers, and 63 parents/caregivers.

The evaluation examined three objectives: To assess UNICEF contribution to the enabling environment for ECD; system strengthening for the implementation of integrated ECD services; and programme results for children and caregivers benefiting from UNICEF work in these areas. A total of 17 questions - three core evaluation questions (EQs) and 14 sub-questions were examined to assess the (1) relevance; (2) coherence; (3) effectiveness; (4) efficiency; and (5) sustainability of this work.

## Evaluation questions and key findings

**EQ1.1. To what extent do UNICEF-supported policies and practices align with national goals for ECD and ECE and the organizational commitment to progressively reach the poorest and most marginalized children, including children with disabilities?**

UNICEF support in Lesotho closely aligned with national priorities for ECD and ECE, focusing on progressively reaching the most disadvantaged and marginalized children, including those with disabilities. The national ECD policy and plan were sufficiently aligned with the Nurturing Care Framework (NCF), with UNICEF playing a pivotal role in promoting a multisectoral approach encompassing health, nutrition, education, child protection, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). Despite the government's commitment to equitable access, as reflected in its policies, implementation challenges persist due to limited resources and inadequate political attention.

**EQ1.2. To what extent is there policy coherence in the sectors that are responsible for providing ECD and ECE services?**

In Lesotho there is a good level of policy coherence in the sectors responsible for providing ECD and ECE services. The ECD multisectoral policy and strategy constitute the main legal frameworks for the implementation of the ECD integrated approach, but implementation is not full developed. Coordination systems such as the Integrated Early Childhood Care and Development (IECCD) committee and the network activity done by the Network of Early

Childhood Education of Lesotho (NECDOL) are in place, but more regular meetings and active participation by the government are needed.

**EQ1.3. Which UNICEF-supported strategies (e.g., advocacy and communication, evidence generation, social behaviour change (SBC) and community engagement, etc.) and inputs/interventions (e.g., policies, regulatory frameworks, tools, processes and/or other practices) were effective in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years?**

Partnerships with both the public and private sector were key cross-cutting strategies for ECD. UNICEF contribution to the enabling environment and in system strengthening was effective in policy development and reforms for ECD that facilitated increased access to public financing for holistic services. However, UNICEF was less successful in describing and assessing how its work in ECD contributed to building public demand and champions for ECD, improving programme quality and strengthening family resilience and adaptiveness to shocks.

**EQ1.4. To what extent was UNICEF support for policy reform, public budgeting, and financing for ECD and the ECE sub-sector successful in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0-8 years?**

UNICEF's role in influencing funding of ECD/ECE policy reforms and to mobilize resources from non-state actors was notable. However, public budgeting was insufficient to fulfill government policy commitments and there was a heavy reliance on external funding, posing significant challenges to sustainably and scale-up.

**EQ2.1. To what extent is there a shared vision and conceptual understanding between UNICEF and government counterparts on (i) determinants of school readiness and learning in the early years; and (ii) the efficacy of the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach?**

UNICEF and the Government of Lesotho (GoL) shared a common vision and a strong understanding of the importance of investing in the early years and adopting a multisectoral approach to prepare children for school. However, staff turnover and capacity gaps remained at decentralized levels in implementing the integrated approach.

**EQ2.2. To what extent has the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach been effective in promoting a continuum of learning opportunities in the early years and school readiness?**

UNICEF has effectively contributed to the provision of a continuum of ECD services and parenting support programmes in Lesotho with the greatest variety of services for children aged 3–5 years. However, national coverage of learning opportunities and stimulation for children aged 0–2 years, as well as parenting support programmes were limited due to insufficient resources. Integration and communication between relevant sector services to monitor children's developmental outcomes, particularly at age 3 years, remains underdeveloped.

**EQ2.3. To what extent is UNICEF work on integrated/multi-sectoral ECD and school readiness meeting the needs of children and caregivers?**

UNICEF has helped to address the needs of young children and parents/caregivers, especially for children aged 3–8 years and for children with disabilities. UNICEF efforts to improve the quality of ECE services contributed to this, by building the capacities of frontline workers on playful teaching and inclusive education techniques for pre-primary. Lack of recent national data on children's developmental status and parent/caregiver practices limited the assessment of UNICEF contribution in the achievement of these results since the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

**EQ2.4. To what extent does UNICEF programme staff have a shared vision and understanding of the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach, coordination mechanisms and capacities across sectors to increase access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years and to support the holistic development of young children and their school readiness?**

UNICEF programme staff have a shared understanding of the integrated ECD approach and a common vision of the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration. However, implementation of the integrated ECD approach was constrained by a lack of clear governance structures and processes for planning, resourcing, monitoring and evaluating the approach.

**EQ2.5. Are UNICEF resources (financial and human) and partnership arrangements well positioned to accelerate and scale-up efforts to strengthen integrated ECD programmes and the ECE sub-sector? Are the partnership arrangements strategic and efficient?**

UNICEF human and financial resources were insufficient for supporting the expanding government vision for ECD. Less than 10 per cent of Goal Areas 1 and 2 resources were allocated to ECD and ECE programming from 2018 to 2023. UNICEF presence, leadership, and convening role for ECD were widely acknowledged by its partners as a strong comparative advantage to the organization.

**EQ2.6. To what extent did UNICEF support or implement measures to enhance the sustainability and utility of the key strategies, programmes, and/or interventions aimed at expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years?**

The sector specific and multisectoral ECD policies and plans that will likely ensure the sustainability of UNICEF efforts in Lesotho. UNICEF has supported the creation of an enabling environment by strengthening ministerial leadership and capacity, guiding the development of policies and legislation, and facilitating the implementation of key strategies aimed at expanding access to early childhood stimulation and learning opportunities. However, continued advocacy is needed to encourage the GoL to increase public investment in ECD and ECE and reduce its dependence on external funding.

**EQ3.1. To what extent do relevant stakeholders collect and utilize reliable and disaggregated data on caregiver practices, children's developmental status and their participation and learning in ECE for programme planning and improvement?**

The availability and quality of data was inadequate to fully assess the outcomes and impacts of UNICEF work as it relates to strengthening caregiver practices and ECD.

**EQ3.2. To what extent has UNICEF work met ECD and ECE objectives and targets for caregivers and young children as it relates to stimulation and learning in the early years?**

Question 3.2 cannot be answered due to a lack of relevant data.

**EQ3.3. To what extent has the theory of change (ToC) for UNICEF work in ECD and ECE held true in terms of the logic and pathways to results for children and caregivers? What are the major contributions by UNICEF in the achievement of results?**

In Lesotho, the major contribution of UNICEF at this stage of programme maturity was in strengthening the enabling environment for integrated ECD policies and plans, and ECD-sensitive sector policies and plans. The evidence trail falls off when tracing the contribution of UNICEF on frontline worker capacities, parenting practices and child impacts due to a lack of data.

**EQ3.4. Which UNICEF strategies have been relevant and effective in supporting child populations that are excluded from formal early learning programmes and/or pre-primary school in countries of different typologies?**

UNICEF advocacy for increased public financing for ECE has not yielded results on a large scale, and as a result, the most marginalized children are excluded from this service. Policies adopted for persons with disabilities will likely have a positive impact on the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-primary, but they are still largely excluded at this time. UNICEF work in child protection offers a platform for scaling parenting programmes that include early learning components for children aged 0–2 years.

they could be strengthened to better address the needs of children aged 0–8 years. Initiatives such as the BELDS programme have significantly improved ECE access, particularly for marginalized children. Despite policy commitments to equitable access, implementation challenges persist due to limited resources and insufficient political attention. UNICEF played a notable role in influencing the funding of ECD/ECE policy reforms and mobilizing resources from non-state actors. However, public budgeting remains insufficient across all sectors with the exception of social protection, leading to heavy reliance on external funding.

**The second objective was to examine the adequacy and sustainability of UNICEF integrated ECD approach and available capacities to support the adaption, acceleration, and scale-up efforts for providing early stimulation and learning support and services for children aged 0–8 years old in Lesotho.**

UNICEF and GoL share a common vision and understanding of the importance of investing in early years and adopting a multisectoral approach. However, staff turnover and capacity gaps persist at decentralized levels in implementing this integrated approach. UNICEF effectively contributed to the provision of various ECD services and parenting support programmes, particularly for children aged 3–5 years. However, national coverage for children aged 0–2 years and parenting support programmes remains limited due to inadequate resources. UNICEF has addressed the needs of young children and parents/caregivers, specifically those aged 3–8 years and children with disabilities, by improving ECE service quality and building frontline worker capacities. However, more recent data are needed to assess the progress made towards UNICEF target of 100 per cent of children being developmentally on track by 2025. The evaluation found sector-specific and multisectoral ECD policies and plans that will likely sustain UNICEF efforts in Lesotho.

While UNICEF programme staff have a shared understanding of the integrated ECD approach and the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration, implementation is hindered by a lack of clear governance structures for planning, resourcing, monitoring, and evaluating the approach. UNICEF human and financial resources were insufficient to support the government's expanding ECD vision. Less than 10 per cent of Goal Area 1 and 2 resources were allocated to ECD and ECE programming from 2018–2023.

## Key conclusions

**The first objective of this evaluation was to assess UNICEF work in support of national policy reform, financing strategies, and budgeting for strengthening ECD and the ECE sub-sector to expand access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0–8 years in Lesotho.**

UNICEF support in Lesotho is well-aligned with national priorities for ECD and ECE by focusing on disadvantaged and marginalized children, including those with disabilities. The national ECD policy and plan developed in 2013 align with the NCF, with UNICEF promoting a multisectoral approach that includes health, nutrition, education, child protection, and WASH. However, the policy needs to be updated. While additional national policies in nutrition, child protection, and inclusive education were developed,

**The third objective was to assess the efficacy of UNICEF support for the development of high quality integrated ECD and ECE programmes that promote holistic ECD and school readiness among caregivers and children aged 0-8 years in Lesotho.**

There was insufficient data to assess progress on UNICEF objectives and contribution to outcomes and impacts related to the integrated ECD approach. At this stage of programme maturity, UNICEF's major contribution in Lesotho has been strengthening the enabling environment for integrated ECD policies and plans, as well as ECD-sensitive sector policies. More recent data is needed to understand UNICEF contribution to frontline worker capacities, parenting practices, and child impacts. Because UNICEF work is in its early stages, strategies for reaching excluded populations primarily involve advocating for a strengthened enabling environment. UNICEF advocacy for increased public ECE financing has not yielded significant results, excluding the most marginalized children from this service. Adopted policies for people with disabilities will likely positively impact the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-primary, and strengthening teacher capacities to work with children who have disabilities will likely improve the quality of services. However, children with disabilities are currently largely excluded currently early learning opportunities in Lesotho. UNICEF work in child protection offers a platform for scaling parenting programmes that include early learning components for children aged 0-2 years.

## Recommendations

These recommendations offer guidance to address the challenges and limitations outlined in the evaluation report and provide a framework for enhancing the impact and sustainability of UNICEF ECD and ECE interventions in Lesotho. These recommendations were developed and finalized in an on-line consultation with key stakeholders from the LCO.

### Recommendation 1:

**Advocate for an increase in public financing for ECD, and review and sharpen the ECD policy.**

#### Sub-recommendations

- 1.1.** Advocate for increased public financing to especially address the needs of marginalized children (disabled, living in poor communities, orphans, not living with parents etc.) and to reduce donor dependency for sustainability.

- 1.2.** Strengthen policies to address specific needs of children aged 0-2 years and aged 3-5 years and develop a costed implementation plan.

### Recommendation 2:

**Strengthen external and internal capacity for the integrated ECD approach.**

#### Sub-recommendations

- 2.1.** Advocate/support to strengthen the capacity of the Early Childhood Care and Development Unit in the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), especially to implement the integrated ECD approach.
- 2.2.** Scale up and modify parenting programmes currently being implemented, to include early learning and responsive caregiving components for young children, especially for children aged 0-2 years.
- 2.3.** Establish a governance structure within UNICEF to enhance coordination and accountability with the implementation of integrated ECD approach.

### Recommendation 3:

**Strengthen data availability and reach marginalized groups to uphold the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) 2030 agenda.**

#### Sub-recommendations

- 3.1.** Strengthen data collection and monitoring systems to track progress and to inform programme improvements. For example, ensuring the regular implementation of MICS.
- 3.2.** Develop strategies to reach the most disadvantaged and excluded children, such as those with disabilities, living in remote areas, orphans and those not living with their parents.

# 1

## Background



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### Evaluation context

Lesotho is located in the Eastern and Southern Africa region with a population of 2.3 million people, including 12 per cent of children under five [7]. Lesotho is classified as a lower-middle income and fragile country and is vulnerable to climate-related shocks, the urbanization phenomenon, and sporadic political crisis [8]. The multidimensional poverty rate declined from 65 per cent in 2014 to 45 per cent in 2018 and the gross domestic product grew by 1.9 per cent in 2022 to 2.3 per cent in 2023 [6]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had detrimental consequences on household livelihoods, as well as the public budget allocated to child-specific social assistance programmes [1, 6]. A majority of children under five (54 per cent) in Lesotho live in poverty [7].

The main threats to ECD from 2018 to 2023 were in the home environment, including insufficient access to food and nutrition, and exposure to health and safety risks. For example, 32-38 per cent of children are considered stunted [6, 7], and only 10 per cent have a minimum acceptable diet [7]. Lesotho has the second highest human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) prevalence rate in the world, which represents a threat

for children's holistic development and caregivers' well-being, especially young mothers. The disease has affected household structures, caregiving practices and compromised child health and education outcomes. Children with HIV/AIDS and children with disabilities are most at risk of not developing their full potential [6, 7, 8]. Another challenge for optimal child development is the limited early stimulation and responsive care provided by parents (28 per cent) [7]. An alarming number of children (83 per cent) are exposed to violent discipline [7] and violence against women is prevalent, including young mothers [1, 8]. The problem of learning loss and lack of foundational skills worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic with the school closures. Even prior to this, only 45 per cent of students aged 7-14 years acquired core reading skills and 15 per cent foundational mathematics skills [6].

### Object of the evaluation

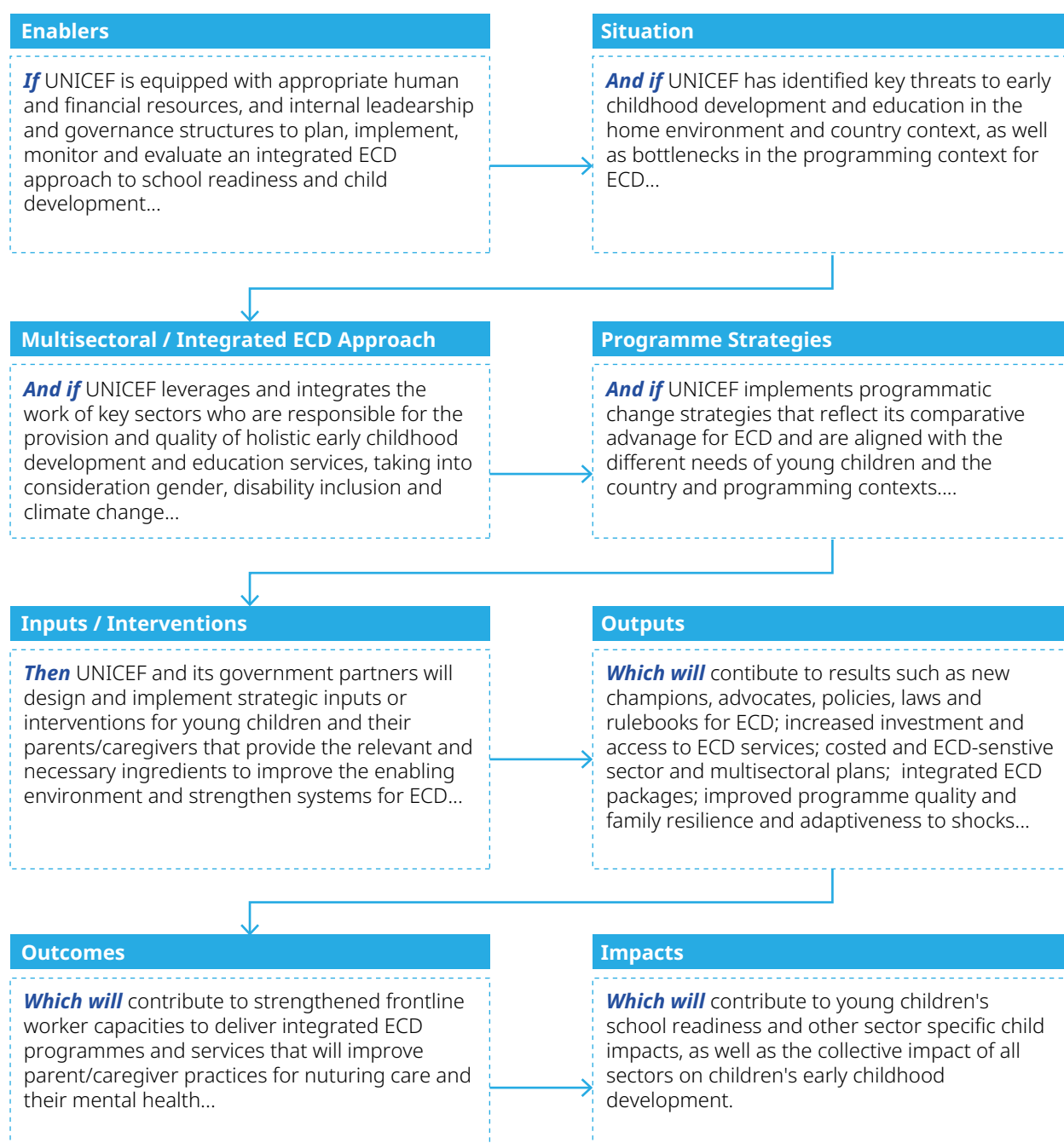
Key stakeholders of UNICEF work in ECD and ECE in Lesotho included:

- ▶ GoL, including all relevant sectors contributing to ECD, such as health, education, child protection and social policy;

- ▶ Other partners, including the private sector, United Nations (UN) agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs), and academic institutions;
- ▶ Frontline workers of ECD in the health, education and child protection sectors;
- ▶ Parents and caregivers of children aged 0-8 years, who benefit from UNICEF-supported parenting programmes; and
- ▶ Children aged 0-8 years, especially the most marginalized child groups (e.g., children living in remote villages, children living in poverty and children with disabilities).

The ToC for UNICEF work in ECD and ECE in Lesotho was retroactively developed using a template from the global evaluation to better articulate the object of the evaluation – the programmatic scope being assessed, its logic/rationale, evaluative components, and pathways to results for young children. A simplified ToC narrative is presented below (*see Figure 1*); a more detailed version of the Lesotho evaluation ToC is provided in Annex 2. This ToC is evidence-based utilizing all evaluation data sources and is integrated into the presentation on the evaluation findings to compare UNICEF objectives with the results achieved.

**Figure 1.** Simplified theory of change of UNICEF work for ECD and ECE, Lesotho



In the next sections, the objective of the evaluation is described in greater detail and what components were assessed, including the:

- ▶ **Efficiency of UNICEF work** – LCO leadership and governance of the integrated ECD approach and investments in ECD and ECE programming;
- ▶ **Effectiveness of UNICEF work** - Strategies for UNICEF work in ECD and ECE and the change the organization seeks to influence through its mandates and comparative advantage;
- ▶ **Coherence of UNICEF work** – Manner in which the multisectoral and integrated ECD approach is operationalized and implemented in practice;
- ▶ **Sustainability of UNICEF work** - UNICEF-supported inputs or interventions to enhance the enabling environment and strengthen systems for the integrated ECD approach; and
- ▶ **Effectiveness and impact of UNICEF work** - Intended outputs, outcomes and impacts of UNICEF work in ECD and ECE.

## Organizational enablers – Efficiency of UNICEF work

According to the UNICEF Strategic Plan (SP) ToC, the performance enablers “are the organizational structures, systems, resources and assets that UNICEF will continuously invest in to become a more agile, values-based, effective and efficient organization that can effectively respond to change and uncertainty” [21]. For this evaluation, the efficiency and internal coherence of UNICEF work with regards to human and financial resource investments, leadership and governance as it applies to the multisectoral, integrated ECD approach were examined. Because there was no standard definition for the “integrated ECD approach” in Lesotho as it applied to this evaluation, the resource allocations for this portfolio could not be quantified. Through this evaluation, specific budget line items were identified to assess UNICEF investments in the integrated ECD approach and for early learning. These findings are articulated EQ2.5 and the methodology for calculating the financial investments are provided in [Annex 6](#). This analysis demonstrated that about US\$1.2 million was utilized from 2018 to 2023 for the ECD portfolio focused on the integration of ECD services, compared to about US\$340,000 for ECE.

## Change strategies – Effectiveness of UNICEF work

For this evaluation, the applicability, relevance and effectiveness of 11 UNICEF change strategies in addressing key threats to ECD in Lesotho were examined. These strategies reflect UNICEF comparative advantage and are identified in UNICEF SPs (2018–2021 and 2022–2024): (1) partnerships (public and private); (2) capacity development and technical assistance; (3) advocacy and communication; (4) policy and programme design; (5) SBC and community engagement; (6) programme scale-up; (7) evidence generation (which includes situation data, M&E); (8) resource mobilization for UNICEF programmes; (9) supply chain/service delivery; (10) knowledge, innovations and learning; and (11) risk-informed humanitarian and development nexus programming. Definitions for each of these strategies are provided in [Annex 2](#).

## Multisectoral approach – Coherence of UNICEF work

The applicability and coherence of UNICEF work in ECD and ECE as articulated in the multisectoral, integrated ECD approach [23] were examined in the evaluation. The organization emphasized a multisectoral approach to ECD programming starting with the previous UNICEF SP (2018–2021), which has been further elaborated upon in the ECD Vision 2030 [23, 24]. The multisectoral, integrated ECD approach for UNICEF work is strongly informed by the [Nurturing Care Framework](#), which was launched in 2018, and builds on evidence of how child development unfolds and proposes a set of effective policies and interventions that improve child development [25]. The framework hinges on five components of nurturing care needed for healthy growth and development: health, nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early stimulation and learning. It recognizes the critical role that parents, and other caregivers have in providing nurturing care and articulates the importance of communities, services and policies to support families of young children. Definitions for a typology of possible integration approaches are provided in [Annex 2](#).

## Inputs and interventions – Sustainability of UNICEF work

The applicability, relevance, effectiveness and sustainability of 11 UNICEF-supported inputs and interventions that target the enabling environment and strengthen systems for scaling opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years were examined. Within the enabling environment, these inputs included: (1) ministerial leadership; (2) design of policies and legislation; (3) public-private financing; and (4) public demand. Within systems, these inputs include: (1) planning and budgeting; (2) multisectoral coordination; (3) data and information systems; (4) quality assurance and accountability; (5) workforce development; (6) curriculum and resource development; and (7) family and community engagement. Definitions for each of these inputs and interventions are provided in [Annex 2](#).

## Intended results – Effectiveness and impacts of UNICEF work

As reported in the Lesotho country programme document (CPD) 2018 [1], ECD was included in the child survive and thrive component and linked with health, education, nutrition, hygiene, HIV/AIDS prevention and child protection systems. ECE was part of education and aims at improving school readiness, and was associated with SBC, community engagement, and positive parenting. Ensuring access to ECD and pre-primary education for children with disabilities and from disadvantaged communities was also part of the results framework for ECD and ECE. This evaluation focused upon the outcome indicators related to the integrated ECD approach rather than all indicators. These indicators included pre-primary enrolment and access to social assistance (*see Table 1*).

**Table 1.** Key performance indicators associated with the integrated ECD approach in Lesotho

| Result area                                                                                                                                                                       | Key performance indicator                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Outcome 1: By 2023, young children (aged 0-9 years), particularly the most vulnerable, benefit from gender responsive health, nutrition and early learning services.              | Gross enrolment of children in pre-primary education.<br>Baseline: 42% (2018)<br>Target: 55% (2023)                                                                                                                     |
| Outcome 3: By 2023, all children, particularly the most vulnerable, benefit from gender-responsive social policies for the sustainable and equitable realization of their rights. | Percentage of monetary and multidimensionally deprived children in poor family that are directly benefited from social assistance programmes (cash)<br>Baseline: 32.77% (85,308) (2018)<br>Target: 60% (156,185) (2023) |

**Data Source:** CPD 2018 [8]

## Enabling environment outputs

This evaluation examined the applicability and effectiveness of four enabling environment outputs, including: (1) gaining the buy-in of champions and advocates for ECD/ECE; (2) the adoption of ECD/ECE policies, laws or rulebooks; (3) increased investments in ECD/ECE; and (4) increased access to opportunities for learning and holistic development in the early years. Definitions for each of these outputs are provided in [Annex 2](#).

## System strengthening outputs

The evaluation examined the applicability and effectiveness of four outputs associated with UNICEF-supported system strengthening work in ECD and ECE, including: (1) costed, ECD-sensitive sector and multisectoral plans; (2) integrated ECD packages; (3) quality programmes; and (4) family resilience and adaptiveness to shocks. Definitions for each of these outputs are provided in [Annex 2](#).

## Frontline worker capacities

The applicability and effectiveness of four outcomes for frontline workers in key areas where UNICEF has invested globally in building the knowledge, skills and capacities of individuals who work directly with young children and their families during the reporting period were examined. These included improved frontline worker capacities to: (1) implement family-centred care; (2) assess and monitor children's development; (3) engage and support parents/caregivers; and (4) facilitate play-based and child-centred learning. Definitions for each of these outputs are provided in [Annex 2](#).

## Parent/caregiver outcomes

The evaluation examined the applicability and effectiveness of seven outcomes for parents/caregivers in key areas where UNICEF has invested globally in strengthening parent/caregiver empowerment and practices for nurturing care during the evaluation period. These outcomes were aligned with sector-based work with parents/caregivers and included for the: (1) nutrition sector - good feeding and nutrition practices; (2) health sector - good health seeking practices; (3) WASH sector - good hygiene and safety practices; (4) education sector - support for early learning and stimulation; (5) child protection sector - gender-responsive and positive parenting practices; (6) child protection and social policy sectors - improved parent/caregiver mental health and self-efficacy; and (7) all sectors - early stimulation and responsive care (which is a collective outcome). Definitions for each of these outcomes are provided in [Annex 2](#).

## Child impacts

UNICEF contribution to two targets within Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 (quality education) or child impacts related to school readiness and ECD were examined. These included for the: (1) education sector – evidence of increased participation rate in organized early learning (SDG 4.2.2); and (2) a collective impact indicator for ECD – evidence of increased proportion of children aged 24–59 months who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being (SDG 4.2.1). Five other sector-specific child impacts were identified that were outside of the scope of this evaluation, but theoretically plausible through the multisectoral, integrated ECD approach.<sup>2</sup> To the extent possible, all data was disaggregated by age, sex, geography, disability, nationality/refugee status, wealth quintile, and urban/rural settings. Definitions for all child impacts are provided in [Annex 2](#).

2 This included SDGs 2 and 3 (good health, nutrition and well-being) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

# 2

## Purpose, objectives and scope

### Evaluation purpose

This evaluation focused on UNICEF contribution to national ECD and ECE policies, systems, and programme interventions that aim to scale access to [early childhood stimulation](#) and [early learning](#) opportunities for children aged 0-8 years and their parents/ caregivers to ensure their holistic development and [school readiness](#). The evaluation also focuses on whether UNICEF [integrated ECD approach](#) has resulted in the intended cohesiveness, efficiencies, and complementarities within and across UNICEF programmatic Goal Areas of the previous and current SPs (2018-2021 and 2022-2025) to ensure holistic child development and school readiness.

The purpose of the evaluation was to enhance **organizational learning** and to strengthen **organizational accountability**. On the learning side, the evaluation investigated the extent to which UNICEF has leveraged organizational investments on the integrated ECD approach and used its knowledge, resources, and experiences to support countries in strengthening their national ECD and ECE programmes. The evaluation also examined UNICEF achievement of results aimed to increase access to ECE and care opportunities for accountability

purposes. Evidence from the evaluation was designed to facilitate decision-making, advocacy, and resource mobilization and to contribute to global learning within the ECD and the ECE sub-sector.

### Evaluation rationale

This evaluation was timely and necessary given: (a) UNICEF prioritization and investment in ECD and early learning during the evaluation period; (b) UNICEF leadership and visibility in ECD and ECE; (c) the need for evidence on progress towards results, what works and what needs to be adjusted to strengthen UNICEF work in ECD and ECE; and (d) the need for evidence to inform programme guidance and management of the ECD and ECE portfolios.

LCO requested an evaluation of UNICEF work in ECD and ECE from 2018 to 2023 in the country to improve its support to the GoL in consistency with the country office's aim to prioritize ECD and upgrade the implementation of the integrated approach, and in view of an IECCD national strategy review.



## Evaluation audiences and intended uses

The **primary audience** for this evaluation is **UNICEF CO**, including senior leadership and those responsible for the strategic choices of ECD/ECE programming and reporting within the organization. Other primary users include those who are directly accountable for the design, implementation, coordination, and monitoring-evaluation-learning aspects of ECD/ECE programmes in the CO.

An internal **secondary audience** for the evaluation includes other UNICEF focal points who collaborate and coordinate with ECD/ECE programmes (such as child protection, disability inclusion, SBC, nutrition, health, social policy). For this stakeholder group, the evaluation provides evidence on the effectiveness of multisectoral approaches that can be leveraged to expand opportunities for early stimulation and learning.

An external **secondary audience** for the evaluation is other United Nations agencies/organizations (such as UNESCO, WHO, and the World Bank) and strategic education partners such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), Education Cannot Wait, and the Education Outcomes Fund, the Roger Federer Foundation (RFF), the partner international non-governmental organizations (iNGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) such as the Red Cross, World Vision, Help Lesotho, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), LANFOD, ECCD network. The evaluation provides partners with good practices in support of providing universal access to quality ECD, care and pre-primary education so that young children are ready for primary education.

## Evaluation objectives

The evaluation examined **three objectives** to assess UNICEF contribution to the enabling environment for ECD and ECE; system strengthening for the implementation of integrated ECD and ECE services; and programme results for children and caregivers benefiting from UNICEF work in these areas.

### ► **Enabling Environment for Integrated ECD**

**Approach:** Assess UNICEF work in support of national policy reform, financing strategies, and budgeting for strengthening ECD and the ECE sub-sector to expand access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0-8 years in Lesotho.

### ► **System Strengthening for Implementing Integrated ECD Approach:**

Examine the adequacy and sustainability of UNICEF integrated ECD approach and available capacities to support the adaption, acceleration, and scale-up efforts for providing early stimulation and learning support and services for children aged 0-8 years in Lesotho.

### ► **Programme Results from Integrated ECD**

**Approach:** Assess the efficacy of UNICEF support for the development of high quality integrated ECD and ECE programmes that promote holistic early childhood development and school readiness among caregivers and children aged 0-8 years in Lesotho.

## Evaluation scope

### Programmatic

The evaluation included **all Goal Areas**, but greater attention was given to the education, health and child protection sectors as the most common ministerial leaders or anchors for integrated ECD services. The evaluation focused upon UNICEF-supported work to accelerate results for the most marginalized children from birth up until their entry into primary school (Grade 1). The evaluation adopted a dual-generation approach and focused upon **children aged 0-8 years**, as well as the support and engagement of their **parents and caregivers**.

Given the responsibilities of different sectors in providing ECD/ECE services, the data was analysed by smaller age intervals to assess the unique contribution of UNICEF for each age group where evidence existed. For example, children aged 0–2 years (the first 1,000 days) typically receive integrated ECD services through the health sector. Children aged 3–5 years more often receive stimulation and learning services through the education sector. Children aged 6–8 years may receive services from the education sectors, as well as the child protection sector.

Evaluation data were analysed by the type of marginalization being addressed through UNICEF-supported interventions to keep track of issues of equity, gender and inclusion. This included examining evidence on UNICEF work on ECD and ECE for children with disabilities, girls, boys, migrant and refugee children, children living in remote areas, children living in informal urban settlements, children living in poverty, among others. Given the evaluation spans the time before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, both the challenges, and unintended positive interventions that arose in response to this emergency were examined.

## Temporal

The evaluation reference period was 2018 to 2023 to examine key developments in the ECD and ECE sector across the last two strategic planning periods (2018–2021) and (2022–2025). Thus, the evaluation is both summative and forward looking in its design.

## Geographic

Countries included in the global evaluation were those that identified ECD and the ECE as a priority in their CPDs, and where UNICEF-supported ECD/ECE programmes were directly relevant to the thematic scope of the evaluation. Lesotho was selected according to the sampling criteria identified for this evaluation, and because ECD and especially ECE are priority areas for the LCO, and in consideration of the income-level and availability of secondary data on key indicators.

In addition to examining UNICEF work in ECD/ECE on a national level in Lesotho, the evaluation also examined implementation of this work in greater detail within two regions/districts: Leribe and Botha Bothe.

The two districts were selected considering UNICEF presence and support in those geographical areas, and to allow for the engagement of diverse stakeholders, including relevant frontline workers and caregivers from marginalized communities facing exclusion and poverty. UNICEF, in collaboration with other international organizations and local partners was supporting ECD and ECE interventions for children and their families in these two districts, focusing on improving access to healthcare, education, and child protection services. [Annex 9](#) provides additional details on the FGD sample.

Botha-Bothe is located in the northern part of Lesotho. The district is mainly rural and highly impacted by poverty due to the population's reliance on agriculture for subsistence. Approximately 38 per cent of children are considered multidimensionally poor, which means that they experience deprivation in at least three dimensions like housing, sanitation, and protection. Children have limited access to basic services and struggle with malnutrition, poor health outcomes, and limited education opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

Leribe is a district also situated in northern Lesotho. It has been selected because it reflects several social and demographic challenges of the country, particularly for children. The district has more than 50 per cent of population under 18 years and is characterized by high poverty rates, limited access to quality education, and important health challenges (i.e. child malnutrition and stunting; clean water and adequate sanitation), including consequences of HIV/AIDS epidemic such as a high number of OVCs. Agriculture is a main source of income, which is hampered by frequent droughts and the effects of climate change. Culturally, despite Lesotho's communities have strong family and community ties, traditional structures have been jeopardized by migration to urban centres or South Africa, and a high number of children are being raised by grandparents or other relatives.<sup>4</sup>

3 <https://lesotho.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Lesotho%20Child%20Poverty%20Report%20Highlights.pdf>

4 <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/lesotho/situation-reports> and <https://data.unicef.org/country/LSO/>



## Theory-based design

The evaluation adopted a non-experimental, theory-based design to trace UNICEF contribution towards expanding opportunities for early stimulation, holistic development and learning. The evaluation ToC used to analyse how UNICEF programming approaches and strategies translated into implementation outputs, and the extent to which UNICEF commitments were realized are presented below (see *Figure 1 and Annex 2*). The evaluation also assessed the extent to which the underlying assumptions supporting the ToC held true. The ToC underwent further refinement and validation throughout the evaluation with UNICEF consultations and through contribution analysis (see [Contribution Analysis](#)).

## Equity, gender, and human rights-based approach

This evaluation considered gender and human rights from multiple perspectives. First, the evaluation was informed by UN and UNICEF policies and procedures for evaluations, including the ethical inclusion of programme managers (duty bearers) and beneficiaries (rights holders) in the evaluation process.<sup>5</sup> The evaluation was also guided by the principles of confidentiality, accountability, integrity, and independence, as expressed in the ethical review procedures and consent forms for all evaluation stakeholders (see [Annex 7](#)). This evaluation explicitly addressed gender and human rights (especially children's rights, women's rights and rights for persons with disabilities and LNOB principle) throughout its design and data collection and analysis methods and procedures.<sup>6</sup>

- 
- 5 This includes UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis; Standards for Evaluation in the UN System; UNICEF Guidance on Gender Integration in Evaluation; and [UNICEF Global Evaluation Reports Oversight System \(GEROS\) Handbook](#).
- 6 See the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#); the [United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women](#); and the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), and the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy

From the design standpoint, the evaluation included specific questions about equity, inclusion and gender equality within each evaluation theme. The evaluation included frontline workers who deliver programming to marginalized child groups (children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children, etc.), as well as parents/caregivers who are the rights holders, alongside their children, in receiving benefits from UNICEF programmes. In addition, the views of duty bearers were gathered to answer the EQs at the national and subnational levels. While a gender balance of key informants was sought, the gender composition of the education and health sectors and those working within it varied by country.

In terms of data collection and analysis, the evaluation team ensured that all of the data was analysed to the extent feasible by age, sex, geography (region/directorate), disability, nationality/refugee status, wealth quintile, and urban/rural settings. For example, in the

qualitative data coding manual, tags were designed to learn when a passage of text referred to a specific child population, which enabled the identification of associations or patterns in the evidence according to these populations.

## Evaluation questions and criteria

EQs were organized by evaluation objectives and were aligned with [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development evaluation criteria](#) specified in the ToR (see [Annex 1](#) and [Table 2](#)). The evaluation included a total of 17 questions - three core EQs and 14 sub-questions. Five evaluation criteria were prioritized in the requirements because they responded best to the evaluation purpose and objectives: (1) relevance; (2) coherence; (3) effectiveness; (4) efficiency; and (5) sustainability (see [Annex 3](#)).

**Table 2.** Evaluation questions and criteria, Lesotho

| Evaluation questions and sub-questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Evaluation criteria              |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Theme 1: Enabling environment for the integrated ECD approach</b><br>Objective: Assess UNICEF work in support of national policy reform, financing strategies, and budgeting for strengthening ECD and the ECE sub-sector to expand access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0-8 years in Lesotho.                 |                                  |
| EQ1. To what extent was UNICEF support for policy reform, public budgeting, and financing for ECD and the ECE sub-sector successful in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0-8 years?                                                                                                                  | UNICEF evidence and contribution |
| EQ1.1. To what extent do UNICEF-supported policies and practices align with national goals for ECD and ECE and the organizational commitment to progressively reach the poorest and most marginalized children, including children with disabilities?                                                                                               | Relevance                        |
| EQ1.2. To what extent is there policy coherence in the sectors that are responsible for providing ECD and ECE services?                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | External coherence               |
| EQ1.3. Which UNICEF-supported strategies (e.g., advocacy and communication, evidence generation, SBC and community engagement, etc.) and inputs/interventions (e.g., policies, regulatory frameworks, tools, processes and/or other practices) were effective in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years? | Effectiveness                    |
| EQ1.4. To what extent was UNICEF support for policy reform, public budgeting, and financing for ECD and the ECE sub-sector successful in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0-8 years?                                                                                                                | Effectiveness                    |

| Evaluation questions and sub-questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Evaluation criteria               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Theme 2: System strengthening for the integrated ECD approach</b><br>Objective: Examine the adequacy and sustainability of the UNICEF integrated ECD approach and available capacities to support the adaption, acceleration, and scale-up of efforts providing early stimulation and learning support and services for children aged 0-8 years in Lesotho.          |                                   |
| EQ2. To what extent has UNICEF leveraged the integrated ECD approach to support relevant stakeholders in Lesotho in building capacities and systems to adapt, accelerate, and scale-up efforts to strengthen coordination across sectors in support of holistic development of young children aged 0-8 years?                                                           | UNICEF evidence and contributions |
| EQ2.1. To what extent is there a shared vision and conceptual understanding between UNICEF and government counterparts on (i) determinants of school readiness and learning in the early years; and (ii) the efficacy of the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach?                                                                                                    | External coherence                |
| EQ2.2. To what extent has the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach been effective in promoting a continuum of learning opportunities in the early years and school readiness?                                                                                                                                                                                         | Effectiveness                     |
| EQ2.3. To what extent is UNICEF work on integrated/multi-sectoral ECD and school readiness meeting the needs of children and caregivers?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Relevance                         |
| EQ2.4. To what extent does UNICEF programme staff have a shared vision and understanding of the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach, coordination mechanisms and capacities across sectors to increase access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years and to support the holistic development of young children and their school readiness? | Internal coherence                |
| EQ2.5. Are UNICEF resources (financial and human) and partnership arrangements well positioned to accelerate and scale-up efforts to strengthen integrated ECD programmes and the ECE sub-sector? Are the partnership arrangements strategic and efficient?                                                                                                             | Efficiency                        |
| EQ2.6. To what extent did UNICEF support or implement measures to enhance the sustainability and utility of the key strategies, programmes, and/or interventions aimed at expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years?                                                                                                            | Sustainability                    |
| <b>Theme 3: Programme results from Integrated ECD Approach</b><br>Objective: Assess the efficacy of UNICEF support for the development of high quality integrated ECD and ECE programmes that promote holistic ECD and school readiness among caregivers and children aged 0-8 years in Lesotho.                                                                        |                                   |
| EQ3. To what extent has the integrated ECD approach been successful in promoting early childhood development and school readiness among caregivers and children aged 0-8 years?                                                                                                                                                                                         | UNICEF evidence and contribution  |
| EQ3.1. To what extent do relevant stakeholders collect and utilize reliable and disaggregated data on caregiver practices, children's developmental status and their participation and learning in ECE for programme planning and improvement?                                                                                                                          | Effectiveness                     |
| EQ3.2. To what extent has UNICEF work met ECD and ECE objectives and targets for caregivers and young children as it relates to stimulation and learning in the early years?                                                                                                                                                                                            | Effectiveness                     |
| EQ3.3. To what extent has the ToC for UNICEF work in ECD and ECE held true in terms of the logic and pathways to results for children and caregivers? What are the major contributions by UNICEF in the achievement of results?                                                                                                                                         | Coherence and effectiveness       |
| EQ3.4. Which UNICEF strategies have been relevant and effective in supporting child populations that are excluded from formal early learning programmes and/or pre-primary school in countries of different typologies?                                                                                                                                                 | Relevance                         |

**Relevance** referred to the extent to which the intervention objectives and design responded to children’s needs, the country context, and partner/institution needs, policies, and priorities. **Coherence** referred to the compatibility of the interventions with other interventions, sectors or institutions. **Effectiveness** referred to the extent to which the interventions achieved their objectives and results, including any differential results across the targeted groups. **Efficiency** referred to the extent to which the interventions delivered results in an economic and timely way. **Sustainability** referred to the extent to which net benefits of an intervention continued or were likely to continue.

**Equity, gender and human rights** considerations were cross-cutting criteria that were integrated throughout the EQs. These criteria referred to the extent to which the interventions addressed equity, gender and human rights in their design, implementation and intended results. Other criteria for the evaluation included **programme objectives and targets** established in the applicable CPDs.

A qualitative ranking scale was used to inform overall judgements for the three core EQs and sub-questions (see [Annex 4](#)). For each core EQ, the ranking scales represent a summative analysis of all data sources and triangulate information on three variables: (1) the level/amount of the evidence found; (2) the quality of evidence found; and (3) UNICEF contribution to the results. The qualitative ranking scale was also applied to each evaluation sub-question based upon the evaluation criteria.

## Data collection methods

This evaluation utilized a mixed method approach to answer the EQs through the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative evidence. The methods varied in objective, sampling criteria and sample size and included secondary data collection, primary data collection, and data validation activities as follows:

### Secondary data collection

- ▶ Secondary quantitative data analysis of UNICEF monitoring data on ECD and ECE.
- ▶ Detailed desk review of applicable CPDs, country office annual reports (COARs), UNICEF-supported evaluations/studies, as well as national government policies and programme documents.

### Primary data collection

- ▶ Consultations and key informant interviews with UNICEF staff working or contributing to ECD and ECE programmes.
- ▶ Key informant interviews and FGDs with relevant duty bearers and rights holders (government, implementing partners, frontline workers, and parents/caregivers).

### Data validation activities

- ▶ Consultations with UNICEF CO staff members contributing to the ECD and ECE portfolios to validate the analysis of their ToC.
- ▶ Co-creation of evaluation recommendations through a virtual presentation and workshop with the LCO.

## Evaluation sample

The Lesotho evaluation sample is summarized below (see Table 3); and further details on the sampling approach are provided in the subsequent sections for each evaluation method. Overall, the evaluation team engaged a total of 131 participants in Lesotho, with 90 per cent female representation. This total includes seven UNICEF staff members working on or

contributing to ECD and/or ECE (57 per cent women); 13 government partners (85 per cent women); 19 implementing partners (63 per cent women), such as UN agencies, CSOs/iNGOs, academia and the private sector; 29 frontline workers (97 per cent women), such as preschool teachers, community health practitioners and social workers; and 63 parents/caregivers (all women).

**Table 3.** Evaluation sample by participation group, Lesotho

| Stakeholder                         | Total | Males | Females    |
|-------------------------------------|-------|-------|------------|
| <b>All participants</b>             | 131   | 13    | 118 (90 %) |
| <b>UNICEF staff members</b>         | 7     | 3     | 4 (57 %)   |
| <b>Government partners*</b>         | 13    | 2     | 11 (85 %)  |
| <b>Other implementing partners#</b> | 19    | 7     | 12 (63 %)  |
| <b>Frontline workers</b>            | 29    | 1     | 28 (97 %)  |
| <b>Parents/caregivers</b>           | 63    | 0     | 63 (100 %) |

\*Director (food security and nutrition), Ag. Director (social assistance/NISSA Manager), Director (child protection), ECCD Specialists (National, Leribe and Botha Bothe), ECCD Officers (National, Leribe and Botha Bothe), Manager Special Education, Health Officer (national), Senior Social Development Officer (Botha Bothe), Special Education Officer (Botha Bothe).

#Programme Manager (Help Lesotho), Education and Literacy Officer (CRS), Health and Nutrition Officer (CRS), Divisional Secretary (Lesotho Red Cross-Botha Bothe), Program Manager and National Coordinator (Network of Early Childhood Development of Lesotho), Head of Department and Lecturers (Lesotho College of Education), Executive Director (Lesotho National Federation Of organizations for the Disabled), Social Protection and Education Specialist (World Bank), Programme Officer (Roger Federer foundation), Secretary General and Safeguarding Officer (Lesotho Red Cross), Programme Manager (World Vision).

## Secondary data collection methods

### Secondary data analysis (quantitative):

Secondary data sources included: (1) UNICEF monitoring and financial data (results assessment module, strategic monitoring questions, core standard indicators, Insight); (2) MICS; and (3) national health and education data (district health information system and education management information system (EMIS)). The relevant key performance indicators (KPIs) in the CPD were examined (see Figure 2); a complete list of all global KPIs and measures are provided in Annex 6. These KPIs were selected for their alignment with the evaluation ToC and measurement framework at the strategy, input, output, outcome and impact levels. The analysis of these KPIs was particularly useful for answering the EQs related to progress on achieving UNICEF targets over the evaluation time period.

**Desk review (qualitative):** The desk review enabled a more in-depth analysis of UNICEF contribution taking into consideration the country context and programme maturity to examine the pathways to change. First, strategically reviewed documents such as CPDs, annual workplans, evaluations, and studies related to ECD or ECE. Secondly, analysed a total of six COARs from 2018 to 2023 using a detailed coding manual (see Annex 8). Finally, reviewed and performed key word searches for a total of 20 national policies, plans, strategies and other relevant national government and programme documents.

## Primary data collection methods

### Key informant interviews (KIIs) with UNICEF:

Consultations and KIIs with UNICEF took place throughout the evaluation process. During the inception phase, the evaluation team consulted with UNICEF global and regional focal points for ECD and ECE to inform the evaluation design and to determine which stakeholders should be included as key informants.

During the data collection phase, KIIs with seven UNICEF staff, including: one ECD/ECE focal point who offered historical and current perspectives on the portfolio, and six from the LCO management and other sections contributing to ECD/ECE (including the deputy representative, health, nutrition, child protection, social policy, and planning, M&E specialists) were conducted.

KIIs provided an opportunity to obtain UNICEF views on the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of UNICEF work in ECD and ECE. A majority of UNICEF consultations were remote using Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately one hour. Key informants gave consent to be interviewed and recorded to efficiently prepare transcripts for data analysis. [Annex 5](#) provides detailed protocols for these KIIs with UNICEF. Interviews transcripts were generated using [Otter.ai](#) or Microsoft Teams, de-identified and written up by team members using a standard template and shared through a confidential section of the evaluation team's online drive.

### KIIs with government and implementing partners:

A total of 13 KIIs were conducted with national and subnational government informants in relevant ministries that implement ECD and ECE interventions. A total of 19 interviews were conducted with implementing partners involved in ECD and ECE work with UNICEF (INGOs, international organizations, relevant national networks and committees, research and training institutions, UN agencies, foundations). The aim of these KIIs was to understand the relevance, coherence and effectiveness of UNICEF-supported work on ECD and ECE, as well as challenges, lessons learned and good practices for integrated ECD. The sampling was purposive and strategic based upon the in-depth desk review and individual participants and organizations were selected in consultation with the LCO.

Interviews with government and other partners were mostly in-person and led by two evaluation team members, with translation support from the LCO where necessary. Interviews were audio-recorded

using smart phones (if consent was granted) and guided by a semi-structured interview questionnaire (see [Annex 5](#)). Interviews transcripts were generated using [Otter.ai](#) or Microsoft Teams, de-identified and written up by team members using a standard template and shared through a confidential section of the evaluation team's online drive. The evaluation team kept a log of persons interviewed to track progress.

### FGDs with frontline workers and parents/caregivers:

The evaluation team conducted participatory FGDs with frontline workers and parents/caregivers who benefitted from UNICEF-supported ECD/ECE programmes for children aged 0–8 years. The objective was to spot check the intended outcomes in the ToC by implementing an interactive and participatory survey to understand what has improved or changed because of UNICEF support. The specific types of interventions or programmes selected for the evaluation were identified in consultation with the LCO and were based upon the needs for the evaluation and operational feasibility.

Frontline workers included any service provider working with children aged 0–8 years, such as teachers, ECD centre caregivers, doctors/nurses, community health facilitators, social workers and disability specialists in UNICEF-supported integrated ECD programmes. Parents/caregivers included mothers and fathers who were benefiting from UNICEF support, such as through services for their children or parenting programmes. The evaluation included frontline workers and parents/caregivers of the most marginalized child populations.

The plan was to conduct FGDs with frontline workers in two subnational districts (16–20 informants per country), with an estimated total of 64–80 informants total (50 per cent women). But the team managed to engage a total of 29 frontline workers, 96.5 per cent female. FGDs with parents/caregivers in two subnational districts (16–20 informants per country) with an estimated total of 64–80 informants (70–80 percent female) was planned. In the end, FGDs with a total of 63 parents/caregivers, all women, were completed. FGD participants were recruited through support of LCO programme managers and implementing partners (such as NGOs or public preschools). [Annex 9](#) provides additional details on the FGD sample.

Due to resource constraints, there were no national evaluators on board for this evaluation as mentioned in the ToR (see [Annex 1](#)). As such, the FGDs were overseen by two evaluation team members. Support from

the LCO for local translators and implementing partners willing to host the FGDs and mobilize the participants was required and received.

Each FGD lasted for 60–90 minutes and took place in a community setting or preschool that was familiar to the participants. Frontline workers and parents/caregivers were informed of the evaluation and volunteered to participate after obtaining their informed consent (see [Annex 7](#)). The evaluation utilized a child-rights based, interactive, and graphic survey tool, called [child-friendly places](#)<sup>7</sup> that enabled the participants to score and discuss the results of the survey in real-time. For this evaluation, five survey items related to support for children's early learning and development, access to and quality of ECD/ECE services in the community, and caregiving practices were included. These survey statements were aligned with the intended outcomes of UNICEF ECD/ECE programming (see [Annex 2](#)), and with the EQs and framework (see [Annex 3](#)).

The scoring of the survey statements was anonymous, such as by asking the participants to close their eyes and raise their hands to select their response or hiding responses from participants view. This type of scoring technique works well in cramped settings and with participants who are illiterate or have low literacy levels. Alternatively, if the participants could read, coloured local objects were used to score their responses to the survey statements. Then the results were tallied and the facilitator put the total number on a chart for all participants to see the results in real-time. The facilitator then asks follow-up and probe questions to help the participants explain the results (see [Annex 5](#)). In this technique, both quantitative and qualitative data was collected.

## Data validation methods

At strategic moments during the evaluation process, relevant UNICEF stakeholders participated in two data validation exercises. These methods were important for ensuring the evaluation findings are accurate, and to address any gaps in knowledge or areas of potential confusion.

**Review of country desk review profiles:** A total of seven UNICEF informants were engaged in a review of the ECD/ECE evaluative country profile. Informants were invited to access and review the profile, to validate the analysis, and to address any gaps in the information. The desk review profile consisted of a ToC narrative and visualization based upon the global template (see [Annex 9](#)). The desk review profile also included secondary data. The results from the desk review are integrated throughout this evaluation report.

**Presentation and co-creation of evaluation recommendations:** UNICEF staff were invited to a virtual presentation on the evaluation findings and proposed recommendations. These recommendations were discussed, sharpened and validated through the meeting.

7 Child-friendly places is a methodology for integrating children's rights into local development initiatives and educational programmes. The methodology can be used for programme planning, M&E facilitated by adolescents and community members. The methodology includes a global toolkit for participatory community assessments with children and youth aged 6–18 years, parents of infants and toddlers under five, and service providers (such as teachers, youth workers, social workers). The methodology was designed by the Children's Environments Research Group within the Center for Human Environments, at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York with funding from UNICEF Office of Research, UNICEF headquarters education section, and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. To date, the methodology has been applied by UNICEF, civil society organizations, international and national NGOs and other community members in more than 35 countries with 70,000+ participants. The data is used for community-led action planning and for monitoring and evaluating the situation of children and adolescents. Learn more about the approach through this [global evaluation](#), and an interactive [map of case studies](#). Read a recent application of this methodology for [UNICEF Eritrea Country Programme Evaluation](#) in 2022.

## Data analysis procedures

### Contribution analysis

The evaluation utilized contribution analysis to identify UNICEF contributions to expanding opportunities for holistic development, early stimulation and learning; strengthening the enabling environment and systems to provide ECD/ECE services; and promoting developmental readiness for the poorest and most vulnerable children. Contribution analysis is a common methodological approach for addressing complex scenarios where results are joint products by many partners and where assessment of sole attribution is difficult.<sup>8</sup> The essence of the approach is to, first, note the results that have occurred (i.e., potential policy changes and services or programmes delivered) and then assess UNICEF plausible contribution to the observed changes.

UNICEF contribution to ECD/ECE is related not only to the relevance, cohesiveness and effectiveness of strategies and programmes at the country level but also to UNICEF influence and leadership. In this context, UNICEF actions can include convening or contributing to networks and public and private partnerships to advance progress on ECD and ECE; thought and knowledge leadership; and advocating and brand building for ECD and ECE to support strategic partnerships, resource mobilization and programme delivery.

The contribution analysis produced a defensible, evidence-based narrative of UNICEF contribution to ECD/ECE results or lack thereof (see *Figure 1* and *Annex 2*). It helped to explain how and why a set of changes occurred, which can be particularly useful when looking at how to expand or replicate ECD/ECE work that has led to positive changes. The process involved taking a broad view of the overall context and acknowledging that change may have been influenced by other events and actors outside UNICEF control and explicitly acknowledged that UNICEF does not act alone. UNICEF interactions with its partners, and the results and outcomes of these interactions, were an important focus of the evaluation.

The contribution analysis steps included:

- ▶ **Step 1:** On a global level, the evaluation team reviewed normative frameworks to prepare an initial version of the ToC that simplified the evaluative dimensions and components (see *Annex 2*).
- ▶ **Step 2:** For Lesotho, the evaluation team reviewed the data coded in Dedoose to identify which UNICEF strategies or inputs were made and describing any observed changes during the evaluation period to determine if they contributed to change at the country level. The evaluation team used a global template to determine where there was evidence for each component, as well as evidence-based and hypothesized pathways to change (see *Annex 2*).
- ▶ **Step 3:** The evaluation team assembled and assessed the contribution narrative and possible challenges to the global ToC to develop the Lesotho ToC (see *Annex 2*). At the output and outcome levels, this involved looking at whether there was strengthened commitment to policies and systems and examined whether interventions and strategies employed in ECD/ECE work resulted in strengthened parenting practices, frontline worker capacities and child impacts.
- ▶ **Step 4:** The evaluation team validated the contribution analysis with the LCO and gathered additional evidence that might back up the contribution story or otherwise explain the changes that have taken place.
- ▶ **Step 5:** Evaluators revised the contribution narratives and produced a logical, well-reasoned story of change for Lesotho that is aligned with the final global ToC (see *Annex 2*).

### Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative analysis was carried out manually for KIIs and COARs using *Dedoose* and through more advanced analytical techniques using *Pythons* “PyPDF2” library to extract and/or highlight relevant codes from national policy and programme documents to answer the evaluation questions. The evaluation team coded six COARs and 39 KIIs by selecting the relevant passages of text and applying the most salient of the 124 codes to the text. A total of 94 codes were applied to 1,213 passages of text for Lesotho.

<sup>8</sup> The evaluation team anticipated not having the necessary data or time to empirically test the CFE programme theory of change through process tracing. Process tracing is more concerned with deciding which of a series of alternative explanations is correct through formal tests, while contribution analysis aims to look at the relative importance of an intervention within larger development processes.

To ensure consistency in the application of codes and inter-rater reliability, the evaluation team developed a codebook structured around the EQs (see [Annex 8](#)). To maintain high reliability, the application of codes was pilot tested, compared and discussed among analysts. The established coding structure was consistently applied to all applicable text, whether done manually or through Python. The team leader quality assured all code applications and in instances where it was deemed necessary, adjustments were performed. Each code was then further analysed inductively to identify emergent themes, and through analysis of code co-occurrence. Code co-occurrence demonstrates there is some type of pattern or relationship between two codes, for example, between a particular UNICEF strategy and a resulting output.

## Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative data was analysed in Microsoft Excel. Given the nature of the EQs, quality and scope of the data provided, the evaluation primarily utilized descriptive statistics to share trends in the information. This means data was analysed according to the evaluation framework to assess trends, disaggregated to the furthest extent possible to understand issues of equity, gender and disability inclusion. [Annex 6](#) provides a detailed list of the indicators analysed through descriptive, spatial or other analytical approaches.

## Data triangulation

Data triangulation is the process of integrating and synthesizing the data from multiple sources to inform judgements about the evaluation questions. This process was facilitated through Dedoose, where all qualitative data was analysed together. The key evaluation questions in the evaluation framework are also a summation of all data sources (see [Annex 3](#)).

## Evaluation limitations and mitigation measures

There were several evaluation limitations to consider, primarily associated with data availability and the evaluability of some aspects of the ECD and ECE portfolios. The main limitation encountered was a lack of sufficient data, specifically data that would permit the analysis of the contributions and pathways to results for children. The evaluation team mitigated this issue by examining all available data and by explaining

where pathways in the ToC are clear and strong, or where these links are hypothesized, and where more data is needed to test and validate the pathways to outcomes and impacts.

Another evaluation limitation was that UNICEF monitoring systems rely upon self-reports from countries, and thus the data may not be reliable and may be biased. Further, given the limited amount of time the team could spend in a country for primary data collection, only a strategic sample of countries, partners and rights holders were included in the evaluation. This presents challenges in the generalization of the evaluation findings and conclusions. To promote transparency in this issue, we have included data quality and strength within our evaluative indicator scales to inform judgements for each core EQ (see [Annex 3](#)).

## Ethical review procedures

The UNICEF Evaluation Office commissioned an independent ethical review under the inputs and guidance of the team leader during the inception and received approval for the inclusion of human subjects in the research (see [Annex 7](#)). Evaluation team members were trained on ethical procedures by the team leader and asked to sign a number of individual statements/commitments on ethical standards for evaluations and on protection and sexual exploitation and abuse. The evaluation team was invited to identify any ethical issues throughout the evaluation project as well as the measures and methods adopted to mitigate them.

Adherence to the “do no harm” principle was required when evaluators interacted with all groups of informants. Standard protocols of obtaining informed consent and assent and/or other relevant protections were followed and recorded in the final evaluation report. Relevant guidance from the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) and UNICEF informed our ethical approach, including: [UNEG ethical guidelines for evaluations](#), [UNEG code of conduct for evaluation in the UN system](#), and [UNICEF procedure for ethical standards](#).

## 4

## Evaluation findings

### Enabling environment for integrated ECD approach

**EQ1.** To what extent was UNICEF support for policy reform, public budgeting, and financing for ECD and the ECE sub-sector successful in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0-8 years?

#### Relevance of national policies

**EQ1.1.** To what extent do UNICEF-supported policy and practice align with national goals for ECD and ECE and the organizational commitment to progressively reach the poorest and most marginalized children, including children with disabilities?

| 1=Weak                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | 2=Emerging                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | 3=Established                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 4=Advanced                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UNICEF-supported policies are not aligned with national goals for ECD and ECE; there is no evidence of the organizational commitment to progressively reach the poorest and most marginalized children, including children with disabilities; UNICEF has no contribution, other partners are working in this space. | UNICEF-supported policies are to a limited extent aligned with national goals for ECD and ECE; there is little evidence of the organizational commitment to progressively reach the poorest and most marginalized children, including children with disabilities; UNICEF contribution is limited, other partners have a much more visible role and influence in this area. | UNICEF-supported policies are mostly aligned with national goals for ECD and ECE, with room for improvement in some areas; the commitment to reaching the poorest and most marginalized children, including those with disabilities, is evident; while UNICEF contributions are notable, there is still room for expansion and improvement in its overall influence compared to other partners. | UNICEF-supported policies are clearly aligned with national goals for ECD and ECE, and are instrumental in achieving these goals; the commitment to progressively reach the poorest and most marginalized children, including those with disabilities, is exceptional; UNICEF contributions are not only substantial, but also set a benchmark for excellence in the field. |

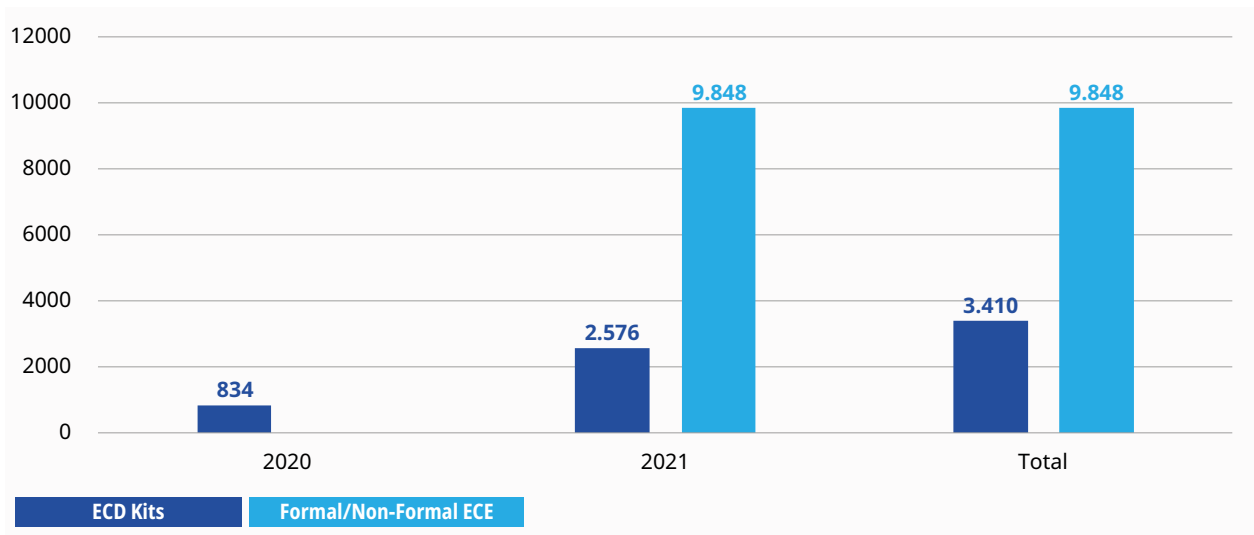
### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ1.1

UNICEF support in Lesotho closely aligned with national priorities for ECD and ECE, focusing on progressively reaching the most disadvantaged and marginalized children, including those with disabilities. The national ECD policy and plan were sufficiently aligned with the NCF, with UNICEF playing a pivotal role in promoting a multisectoral approach encompassing health, nutrition, education, child protection, and WASH. During the evaluation period, additional national policies and strategies in nutrition, child protection, and inclusive education were developed, forming key frameworks to enhance equitable access to early learning and stimulation. However, these policies could more effectively address the specific needs of children aged 0–8 years. Initiatives like the BELDS programme significantly contributed to improving ECE access, especially for marginalized children. Despite the government's commitment to equitable access, as reflected in its policies, implementation challenges persist due to limited resources and inadequate political attention.

### DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ1.1

**UNICEF contributed to increased access to ECD services for children in Lesotho, targeting the most vulnerable children and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.** From 2018 to 2023, UNICEF reached a total of 13,258 children through emergency response services (see Figure 2). The largest share of UNICEF-supported programming consisted of increasing access to formal and non-formal early learning opportunities for children in humanitarian situations (reaching 9,848 children). UNICEF also reached a total of 3,410 children in humanitarian situations who participated in programmes with ECD kits. However, there was no data available on UNICEF-supported ECD services for young children with disabilities or for parents/caregivers. Similarly, there was no data on UNICEF distribution and reach of early learning materials from 2018 to 2023. However, UNICEF has focused on policy implementation and reforms from 2018 to 2023 to continue advancing an equity-focused ECD agenda and to reach more vulnerable children and parents/caregivers.

**Figure 2.** Reach of UNICEF-supported ECD programming for children, Lesotho, 2020–2021



**Data source:** UNICEF RAM 2.5, 2020–2021 (Indicators 1.h.3–9, 2.a.1–1)

**From 2018 to 2023, UNICEF-supported policies were both sector-based and multisectoral in design with varying degrees of ECD-sensitivity. UNICEF advocacy and technical assistance was focused on both policy adoption and implementation.** Seven key policy documents were supported by UNICEF during the evaluation period, which demonstrates the breadth of UNICEF work in ECD in Lesotho (see Table 4). Two documents reflect the integrated ECD approach, covering children from preconception through age 5 years. Two documents reflect the education sector, and both include pre-primary or preschool or the unique needs of younger children. There is one document for nutrition that was the most ECD-sensitive in terms of identifying the unique needs of children of different developmental stages.

**Recent legislation, policies and plans for persons with disabilities and inclusive education applied to all children aged 0-18 years and were not yet ECD sensitive** (i.e., they did not articulate the unique needs of younger children aged 0-8 years) [18, 19, 20]. For example, while the national response plan to end violence against children includes positive parenting as a strategic area of focus, there is no mention of toxic stress or on the impact of violence on young children's healthy brain development. In addition, there is a national act for people with disabilities that includes children but does not specify information by age group [19].

**Table 4.** Key UNICEF-supported national policies and plans for ECD in Lesotho, 2018-2023

| Policy/Plan                                                                                | UNICEF Focus                | Child Age Range Covered                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Integrated Early Childhood, Care and Development Policy, 2013                              | Implementation              | Preconception to age 5 years                                                                                 |
| Integrated Early Childhood, Care and Development Strategic Plan, 2013-2018                 | Implementation              | Preconception to age 5 years                                                                                 |
| Lesotho Food and Nutrition Strategy and Costed Action Plan, 2019-2023                      | Adoption and implementation | Children aged 0-5 months, children aged 6-23 months, children under five, adolescents/youth aged 10-24 years |
| Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy, MoET, 2018                                             | Adoption and implementation | Pre-primary to higher education                                                                              |
| Education Sector Plan 2016-2026                                                            | Implementation              | Preschool to higher education                                                                                |
| National Persons with Disability Equity Act, 2021                                          | Adoption and implementation | Ages not specified                                                                                           |
| Lesotho National Prevention and Response Plan on Violence Against Children and Youth, 2022 | Adoption and implementation | Ages not specified                                                                                           |

**The national policies and plans were well aligned with UNICEF objectives for the enabling environment related to ECD/ECE access, financing and budgeting; however, public demand was less emphasized.** While the level of detail varies, each document identifies specific areas where access needs to be improved and outlines relevant strategies and policies (see Table 5). The documents recognize that securing adequate financing is crucial for effectively implementing their respective objectives and emphasize the need for strategic financial planning, increased government commitment, and

exploring diverse funding sources to ensure sustainability. A strong emphasis on budgeting as a critical tool for effective policy implementation is demonstrated and they highlight the importance of detailed cost analysis, realistic budget projections, and securing adequate funding from various sources to ensure the success and sustainability of programmes across different sectors. While the documents provide evidence of considering public demand in specific instances, they do not offer a comprehensive assessment of the overall level of public demand for services in each sector.

**Table 5.** Emphasis of selected national ECD policies and plans supported by UNICEF from 2018-2023

|                               | More emphasis                                                                                                                                               | Less emphasis                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Enabling environment</b>   | Access, financing, budgeting                                                                                                                                | Public demand                                                                                    |
| <b>System strengthening</b>   | Planning, curriculum development, quality assurance, workforce development, preparedness and resilience, data and information systems, community engagement |                                                                                                  |
| <b>Equity and inclusion</b>   | Children in emergencies, adolescent mothers Vulnerable children, children with disabilities                                                                 | Girls, ethnic minorities, migrant children, unique needs of children aged 0-2, 3-5 and 6-8 years |
| <b>Conceptual frameworks</b>  | Holistic, integrated, multisectoral                                                                                                                         | Nurturing Care Framework, Build to Last Framework                                                |
| <b>Programming approaches</b> | Inclusive education, parenting programmes                                                                                                                   | Education in emergencies                                                                         |
| <b>Outcomes</b>               | Parenting knowledge and skills, stimulation, parenting practices, nurturing care, children's developmental status                                           | Responsive caregiving                                                                            |

**Data Source:** See Table 4

**The national policies and plans were well aligned with UNICEF objectives for system strengthening for ECD/ECE.** The documents demonstrate a shared understanding that curriculum development, quality assurance, and workforce development are essential for achieving the desired outcomes in education, ECD, nutrition, and disability services. The policies and plans outline various strategies and activities aimed at strengthening these areas to enhance service quality and effectiveness and collectively demonstrate a strong commitment to strengthening planning and data systems as essential foundations for effective policy implementation and achieving desired outcomes. The policies and plans also highlight the importance of emergency preparedness and resilience, particularly in the context of education, climate change, and nutrition. They discuss various strategies for mitigating risks, responding to emergencies, and building long-term resilience. The documents identify specific challenges, propose strategies for risk mitigation and response, and advocate for integrating these considerations into policy and planning processes. While the extent of detail varies across the documents, they consistently highlight the importance of engaging with communities, stakeholders, and leaders to ensure that policies are responsive to the needs and priorities of the people they are intended to serve.

**The national UNICEF-supported ECD/ECE development plans, strategies and policies emphasized**

**issues of equity, gender and disability inclusion, but gaps were found.** The policies and plans sufficiently address children in emergencies and adolescent mothers to varying extents, highlighting their vulnerabilities and the need for targeted interventions (see Table 5). The documents also demonstrate a significant focus on protecting and supporting vulnerable children, particularly those with disabilities. While girls and ethnic minorities are acknowledged, there is a need for more detailed discussion of their specific needs and targeted interventions. The lack of mention of migrant children indicates a potential area for future research and policy development.

**Holistic ECD programming is reflected in relevant national policies and strategies, even though the NCF was not explicitly referenced.** The integrated approach was referenced in national ECD development plans, strategies and policies, although not always with a shared understanding of its meaning and especially a clear roadmap on how to implement it. Overall, the selected documents strongly advocate for holistic and integrated ECD services in Lesotho. They present a comprehensive vision for addressing children's needs across all developmental domains through multi-sectoral collaboration, integrated service delivery models, and targeted interventions for vulnerable populations. Addressing the identified challenges related to resources, coordination, and data will be crucial for successfully implementing this

vision and ensuring that all children in Lesotho have the opportunity to thrive.

**The national ECE policies and plans do not explicitly mention the Build to Last Framework, but they do reference scaling up access to ECE as a target,** and to a lesser extent early stimulation. In 2016, preschool enrollment was 42 per cent according to government education statistics, but with rates as low as 4 per cent in the highlands region [8]. With UNICEF support, the GoL was working to institutionalize reception classes for children aged 5–6 years, which are free of charge, by integrating them into primary schools, with the aim of making ECE more accessible and ensuring a smoother transition to primary education. UNICEF supported the expansion of the ECE sub-sector and inclusion in the education sector planning especially via the initial BELDS pilot programme and the second phase from 2020 to 2023. The BELDS approach and toolkit developed by UNICEF and partners supported mainstreaming and expanding equitable, quality and inclusive ECE and resulted in the government’s decision to gradually implement one year of free pre-primary education for all children. While the expansion of reception classes has focused more on areas with disadvantaged children, more needs to be done. Currently, only 310 out of 1,486 primary schools have reception classes. With the support of the RFF, GPE and UNICEF, the target has been set to reach 800 schools with reception classes by 2025, but progress has been slow. For younger children, aged 0–5 years, parents pay fees to cover teachers’ salaries, which is another challenge as some parents cannot afford to pay.

**The inclusive education policy aims to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream education, with UNICEF serving as a key partner in supporting inclusive education and disability rights in Lesotho.** UNICEF has also funded projects focusing on raising awareness and providing assistive technology for schools. For instance, it has worked on advocating for the rights of children with disability, inclusive WASH in schools and a tool for the early identification of disability. Additionally, with UNICEF support, the College of Education was developing an inclusive education programme to address early identification and support for children with disabilities. The goal is to establish an assessment center to support inclusive education and early identification.

**However, inclusive education in Lesotho faces significant challenges, despite the government’s adoption of an inclusive education policy.** The policy, while a positive step, still prioritizes special

education over inclusive education, leading to continued investment in special schools. This lack of understanding about the distinction between the two approaches hinders progress towards truly inclusive education. The absence of accessible infrastructure, such as ramps, poses a significant barrier to the inclusion of children with physical disabilities in regular schools. This often leads to their placement in special schools, which contradicts the ministry’s commitment to inclusive education. There was also a lack of expertise in early identification and intervention for children with disabilities, both within schools and the public administration - which results in many children at risk of developmental delay not being identified early enough. The country relies heavily on the medical model for addressing disabilities. Teachers are not trained to identify disability or to follow a set of standardized guidance on how to do it, which causes lots of variations on how this is done. The absence of a robust referral system further hinders the effective coordination of services for children with disabilities across different ministries and organization. A comprehensive data collection system for disability was lacking, making it difficult to accurately assess the needs and progress of children with disabilities.

**The national ECD policies and plans sufficiently examine outcomes, with the exception of responsive caregiving. While “responsive caregiving” is not explicitly named, many promoted practices clearly align with its core principles.**

The selected documents prioritize equipping parents with the knowledge and skills to create stimulating and responsive environments that foster children’s holistic development. The focus on parent education, and creating nurturing spaces suggests a strong, albeit implicit, emphasis on responsive caregiving in Lesotho’s child development strategies. The documents collectively highlight the interconnectedness of parenting practices, nurturing care, and children’s developmental status. They underscore the need to invest in supporting parents, creating nurturing environments, and regularly monitoring children’s progress to ensure their optimal development. Similarly, while the sources do not explicitly use the term “education in emergencies,” they clearly articulate the need to prepare the education system for various emergencies and integrate relevant knowledge and skills into the curriculum. This approach aligns with the core principles of education in emergencies, which focuses on ensuring continuity of learning and providing psychosocial support in crisis situations.

## Coherence of national policies

### EQ1.2. To what extent is there policy coherence in the sectors that are responsible for providing ECD and ECE services?

| 1=Weak                                                                                                                                                                    | 2=Emerging                                                                                                                                                                                                       | 3=Established                                                                                                                                                                                            | 4=Advanced                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| No policy coherence; no evidence of a multi-sectoral ECD strategy or recognition of the need of ECD policy coherence exists; coordination between stakeholders is ad hoc. | Emerging policy coherence; there is little evidence of a multi-sectoral ECD strategy or recognition of the need; some inter-sectoral coordination exists, but it is not clearly structured and well-functioning. | Established policy coherence; there is evidence of a multisectoral ECD strategy being endorsed (covering two to three sectors) with some gaps (such as a lack of inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms) | Advanced policy coherence; there is evidence of a well advanced multisectoral ECD strategy being endorsed (covering three or more sectors) with explicit inter-institutional coordination mechanisms |

#### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ1.2

In Lesotho there is a good level of policy coherence in the sectors responsible for providing ECD and ECE services. The ECD multisectoral policy and strategy constitute main legal frameworks for the implementation of the ECD integrated approach, but implementation is not fully developed. Other relevant policies in health, nutrition, education, child protection and social policy incorporate the multisectoral approach, although it could be better highlighted in inter-ministerial coordination and role definitions could be better articulated for efficient service delivery and to avoid gaps. Coordination platforms such as the IECCD Committee and the network role played by the NECDOL are in place, but more regular meetings and active participation by the government are needed.

one based on the lessons learned. This new strategy presents an opportunity for UNICEF to advocate for the inclusion of key policies and recommendations, including those identified through this analysis.

#### Other national policies, strategies and programmes for children and their caregivers contribute to the multisectoral ECD approach in Lesotho.

In the child protection sector, a comprehensive strategy to end violence against children was developed with UNICEF support. In this plan, the MoGYSD coordinates interventions across multiple ministries including education, health and finance [5, 6, 20]. Within the nutrition sector, the National Food and Nutrition Strategy and Costed Action Plan provides clear mandates for the education and health sectors in addressing food insecurity, breastfeeding, malnutrition and overweight children [17]. In the education sector, the child-friendly schools programme was designed to provide holistic and integrated early learning and development opportunities. However, the government has struggled to sustain the programme due to resource constraints and only targets primary school children [13]. ECD centres are entry points for access to holistic services (health, nutrition, child protection, WASH). Programmes for teen mothers intersect in the provision of health, nutrition, education and social protection services [17]. The ECE teacher training includes health, nutrition and safety. Nutrition is integrated with some parenting and child protection issues.

**Previously developed national ECD policy documents [10, 11], and the newly developed National Food and Nutrition Strategy and Costed Action Plan articulate a common vision for multisectoral delivery of integrated/holistic ECD and ECE services with clearly defined mandates for**

#### DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ1.2

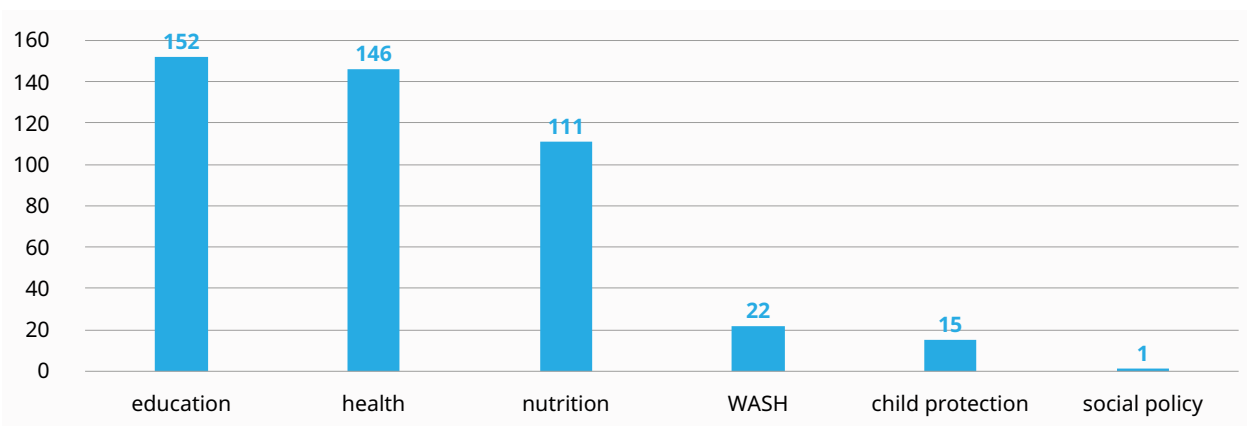
**Lesotho has both a national IECCD Policy and IECCD Strategic Plan [10, 11].** The national IECCD strategic plan was created for the period 2013–2018 and recognizes the importance of integrating health, nutrition, education and social welfare – and has pushed for greater multisectoral awareness among decision-makers. The strategic plan, although developed for the period 2013–2018, was still considered somewhat relevant and was frequently referenced in policy documents and by key informants. However, given the changing and evolving needs, there was wide consensus that the strategy needs to be updated to remain effective and relevant. The MoET, with support from UNICEF, is currently analysing the previous strategy to inform the development of a new

**each relevant ministry** [17]. National ECD policy documents and plans are aligned with the NCF, but mention the education sector the most, followed by health, nutrition, child protection and WASH [10, 11, 17]. Overall, these policy documents recognize the importance of holistic services, parenting support, and access to ECD/ECE services for the most vulnerable groups. Thus, there is coherence between government and UNICEF objectives for the integrated ECD approach within these policies [13]. However, recent legislation, policies and plans for persons with disabilities and inclusive education apply to all children aged 0-18 years and are not yet ECD sensitive (i.e., they do not articulate the unique needs of younger children aged 0-8 years) [18, 19, 20]. While the national response plan to end violence against children includes positive parenting as a strategic area of focus, there is no mention of toxic stress or on the impact of violence on young children's healthy brain development [20]. However, due to a lack of resources and government investment in public financing for ECD and ECE, implementation of this vision has not been fully realized.

**The multisectoral nature of UNICEF work in ECD was well observed in the selected policies and plans. Health, nutrition, education, early**

**detection of disabilities and responsive feeding policies were integrated.** The word *nutrition* was mentioned 111 times in the reviewed policies. Nutrition programmes focus on preventing stunting, anemia, and detect child development problems early (see Figure 3). UNICEF is trying to work in a multisectoral manner to reduce stunting and supported responsive feeding. A monitoring tool is being developed to be used in the nutrition clubs. The in-service training for health workers on infant and young child feeding, the integrated management of acute malnutrition protocol, includes early detection of disabilities and building caregivers' skills on infant feeding and maternal nutrition. However early identification and referral systems are not properly developed yet. *Health* was mentioned 146 times in the reviewed policies (see Figure 3). Primary health care services are integrated with nutrition in maternal and child health and include kangaroo mother care package for newborns. *WASH* and *child protection* were mentioned less in the policy documents, whereas *education* was mentioned the most. There was only one mention in the reviewed policies of the social policy or social protection sector, suggesting the inclusion of this sector in the integrated ECD approach is less advanced.

**Figure 3.** Number of times a sector was mentioned in select ECD policies and plans, Lesotho

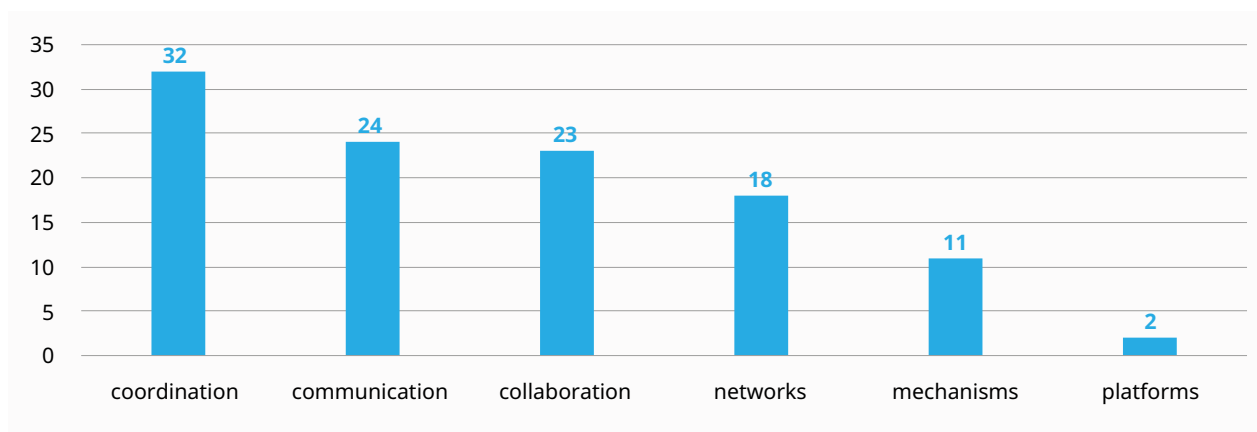


**Data Source:** See Table 4

**Selected national ECD policies and plans recognized the important functions of coordination, communication and collaboration for multisectoral processes, but to a less extent networks, platforms and mechanisms to clearly identify how to implement those goals.** Mechanisms of interministerial and multisectoral collaboration and communication between the ministries responsible for ECD and ECE programming such as the MoET, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Gender, Youth and Social Development (MoGYSD) are not clearly defined. Multisectoral coordination across the different ministries is facilitated through the IECCD Committee, co-chaired by UNICEF and the GoL, where the stakeholders from the different sectors

work on ECD planning and reporting together [6]. The NECDOL is also a platform for multisectoral coordination among organizations working with children aged 0-8 years, most of them engaged in ECE. The interviews confirmed a number of channels of networking, coordination and collaboration, both at national and district level, which are inclusive of various stakeholders but lack the necessary resources for a more regular and effective activity (*see Figure 4* for number of times terms reflecting multisector process are appearing in policy and plan documents). The integrated approach allowed to bring all the stakeholders from different sectors together, and to work on joint planning, monitoring, problem-solving and reporting.

**Figure 4.** Number of times multisectoral processes were mentioned in select national ECD policies and plans, Lesotho



**Data Source:** See Table 4

## UNICEF strategies and inputs

**EQ1.3.** Which UNICEF-supported strategies (e.g., advocacy and communication, evidence generation, SBC and community engagement, etc.) and inputs/interventions (e.g., policies, regulatory frameworks, tools, processes and/or other practices) were effective in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years?

| 1=Weak                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | 2=Emerging                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | 3=Established                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 4=Advanced                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UNICEF-supported strategies and inputs/interventions in the ECD/ECE sub-sector are absent; there is no evidence to suggest that UNICEF had any role or influence in implementing effective strategies or interventions that expand access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years. | UNICEF-supported strategies and inputs/interventions in the ECD/ECE sub-sector are emerging; there is some evidence (in one or two areas) to suggest that UNICEF had effective role or influence in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years, the overall approach falls short of being comprehensive. | UNICEF-supported strategies and inputs/interventions in the ECD/ECE sub-sector are moderate; while established, UNICEF influence in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years show promise (in three to four areas), and is beginning to be recognized. | UNICEF-supported strategies and inputs/interventions in the ECD/ECE sub-sector are effective; UNICEF influence in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years is advanced and spans across many areas (six to seven areas). |

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ1.3

A combination of UNICEF strategies and inputs were effective in expanding access to ECD services from 2018 to 2023. Partnerships with both the public and private sector were key cross-cutting strategies for ECD. UNICEF contributions to the enabling environment and in system strengthening were effective in policy development and reforms for ECD that facilitated increased access to public financing for holistic services. However, UNICEF was less successful in describing and assessing how its work in ECD contributed to building public demand and champions for ECD, improving programme quality and strengthening family resilience and adaptiveness to shocks. Thus, challenges remain to ensure equitable access to high quality ECD services, especially in marginalized areas and for children with disabilities.

### DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ1.3

#### UNICEF strategies and contribution to the enabling environment

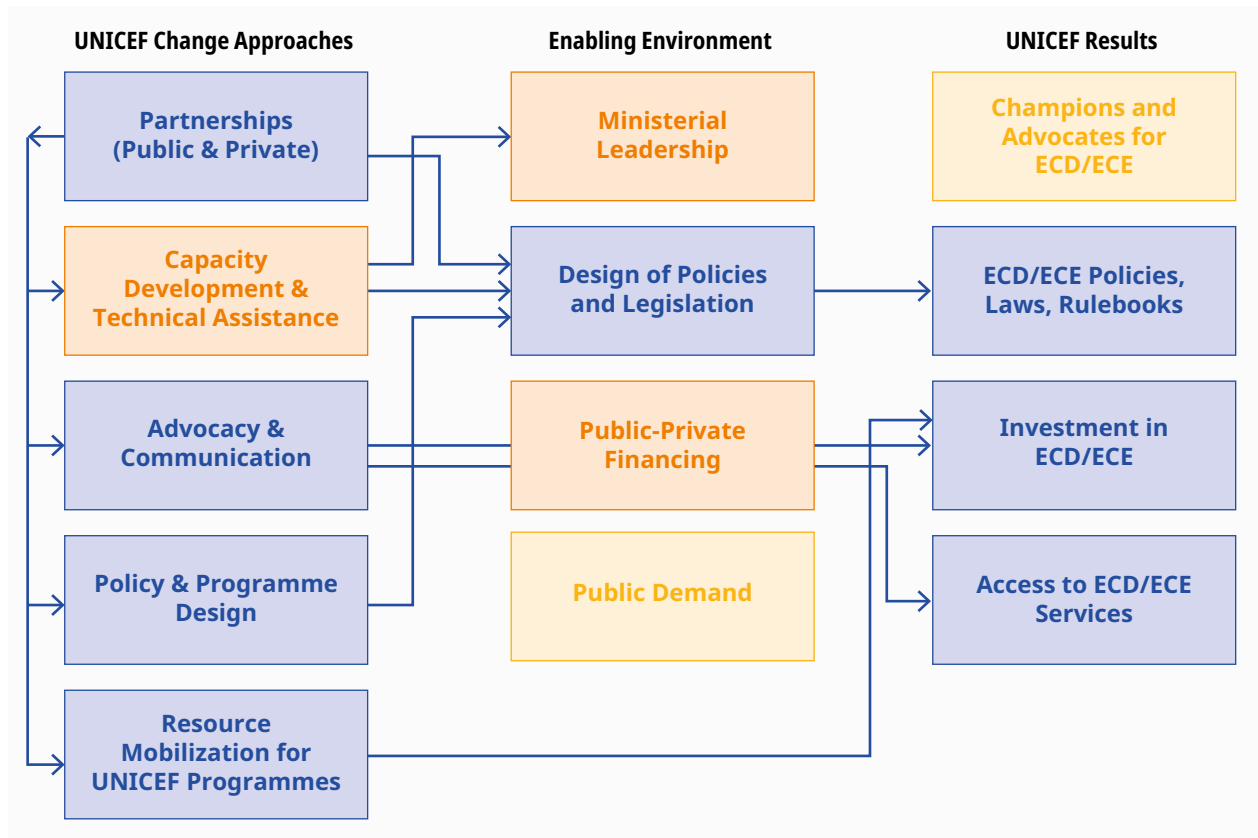
**UNICEF effectively influenced the enabling environment for ECD through interventions that targeted ministerial leadership, and the design of policies for the early years. These interventions contributed to the adoption of ECD policies and plans, as well as investment in and access to ECD services.** The most utilized strategies to affect change in the enabling environment for ECD included: partnerships, capacity development and technical assistance, advocacy and communication, policy and programme design, and resource mobilization for UNICEF programmes (see Figure 5). There was limited evidence on UNICEF facilitating public-private financing for ECD, and no evidence in gaining public demand or buy-in from ECD champions from 2018 to 2023.

**Partnerships (both public and private) was one of the most referenced and influential UNICEF strategies for affecting change in Lesotho and a cross-cutting strategy for all ECD programming.** UNICEF has a strong presence in Lesotho with diverse partnerships at the national and local levels and is widely recognized as a leader for ECD among key stakeholders. UNICEF main counterparts for ECD programming at the government level are the MoET, the Ministry of Health, and the MoGYSD. In terms of partnerships with other agencies, UNICEF

has collaborated mainly with the WHO and the World Bank on various health and education interventions. UNICEF attention to the integration of children with disabilities was facilitated through a partnership with the Lesotho Network of Family of Children with Disability (LNFOD) [3, 4, 5, 6, 8]. UNICEF collaborated with the national College of Education for

early childhood teacher training and quality assurance. The LCO has multiple INGO partners such as World Vision, the Lesotho Red Cross, CRS and Help Lesotho to build sustainable community structures for early child development at the grassroots level. Donor partners include the RFF and GPE to support the expansion of ECE [5, 6].

**Figure 5.** Evidence-based theory of change on UNICEF contribution to the enabling environment for ECD, Lesotho



**Data Source:** Triangulation of all evaluation data sources; Legend: blue box = more evidence; orange box = less evidence; yellow box = no evidence and/or not relevant over the reporting period; solid arrow = evidence-based pathway; dashed arrow = hypothesized pathway

**UNICEF effectively advocated for increased resources for ECD programming from 2018 to 2023, which contributed to increased access to social policy schemes for vulnerable children.**

In 2018, UNICEF utilized the #EarlyMomentsMatter campaign to advocate for an increased budget for ECE, and both the Ministry of Finance and MoET committed to it [1]. UNICEF also engaged in strategic resource mobilization for UNICEF-supported ECE programmes from the private sector (e.g. RFF) and key partners like the GPE. In 2019, UNICEF contributed to the ECE funding gap analysis, and continued to advocate for an increased budget for ECE [2]. In 2020, UNICEF and the MoGYSD advocated for increased social protection programmes for

underprivileged children and their families, such as the child grant [3]. UNICEF advocacy contributed to an increase of the child grant programme coverage from 41,049 households in 2019 to 50,321 in 2020, and the continuation of the OVC Bursary covering 23,845 vulnerable children.

**UNICEF provided capacity development and technical assistance by engaging the government and other partners in policy and programme design.**

These strategies contributed to design and adoption of new policies, as reported in EQ1.1. For example, UNICEF provided technical assistance on the design of national legislation and policies for persons with disabilities and inclusive education so they included all children aged 0-18

years [1–6]. UNICEF also provided capacity development and technical assistance on the design and implementation of ECD/ECE policies and action plans, standards for early learning and development, curriculum design and workforce development [1–6, 12, 14]. UNICEF also strengthened capacities for the integrated ECD approach through ministerial leadership within the education sector as evidenced by the establishment of the ECCD unit in the MoET and their role as the co-chair of the IECCD Committee. However, due to a lack of government uptake from UNICEF on human resources for the ECCD unit, the work has not been adequately sustained and less evidence on this result was found [1].

### UNICEF strategies and contribution to system strengthening

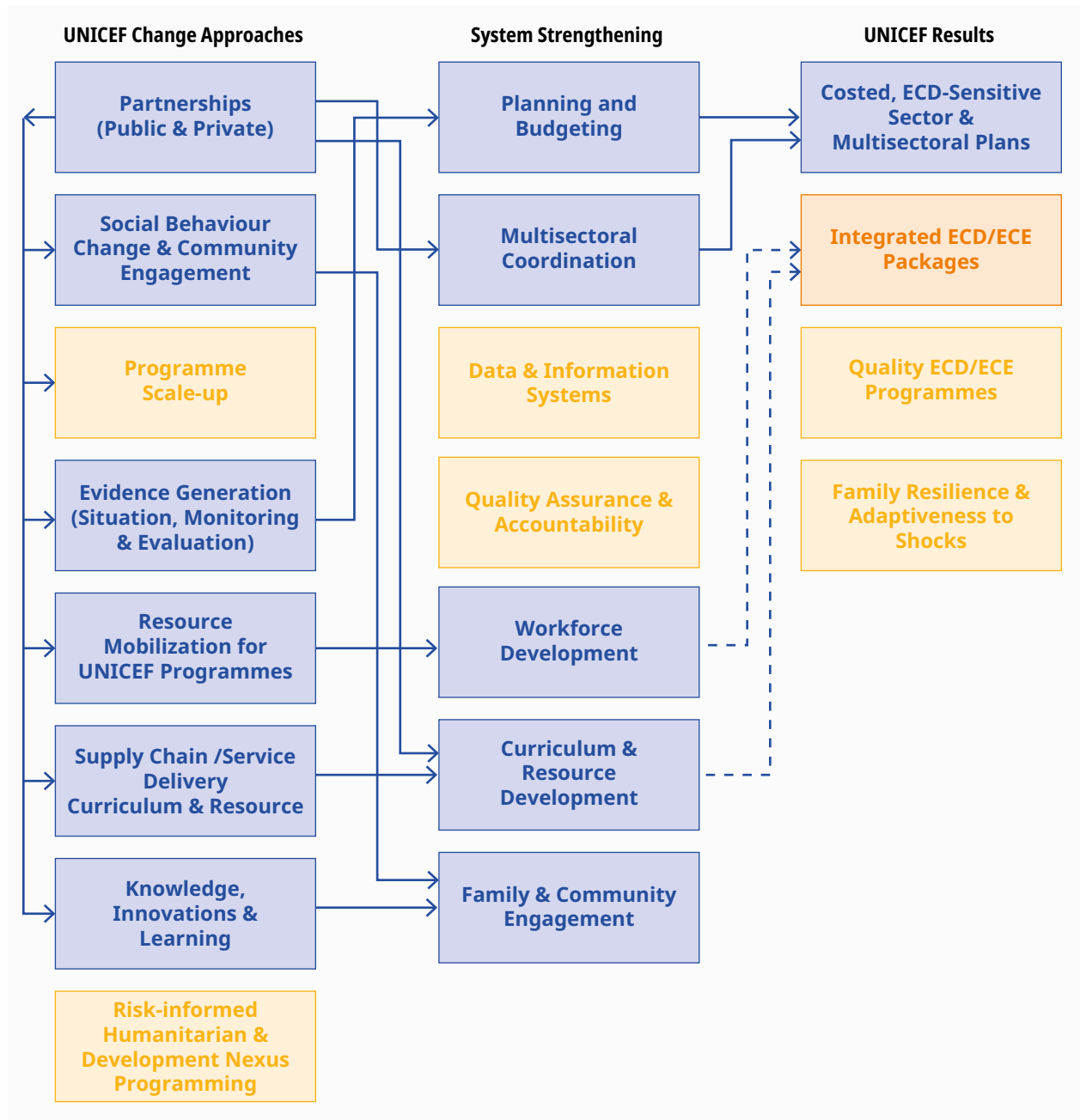
**UNICEF effectively strengthened systems for ECD through interventions on planning and budgeting, multisectoral coordination, workforce development and curriculum and resource development, and family and community engagement. These interventions contributed to sector and multisectoral plans and the implementation of integrated ECD packages.** UNICEF strategies to strengthen systems for ECD included: partnerships, SBC and community engagement, evidence generation, resource mobilization, and knowledge, innovations and learning (see Figure 6). However, there was no evidence of UNICEF strategies associated with programme scale-up due to a lack of resources. While UNICEF supported evidence generation, there was no documentation that data and information systems were a focus from 2018 to 2023. Similarly, no evidence was found on UNICEF efforts to provide quality assurance or improving ECD programme quality. While UNICEF provided valuable resources in response to the pandemic, these were largely supply chain services and there was no evidence that linked these supplies with humanitarian and development nexus programming or in building family and community resilience.

**UNICEF-supported programmes on SBC included targeted multisectoral interventions with teen mothers on health, nutrition, education, as well as broader family and community engagement interventions to raise awareness on ECD, especially where there was low enrollment in early childhood services.** The #EarlyMomentsMatter campaign also contributed to a variety of ECD/ECE programmes and community engagement objectives. The campaign was launched in 2018 as an initiative of

the multisectoral integrated ECCD Committee. The campaign reached 28,763 parents and 54,607 children in 10 districts with messages on ECCD. UNICEF collaborated with CSOs like LNFOD, World Vision, the Lesotho Red Cross, and NECDOL to undertake parenting education and early identification of disabilities in young children and mobilize caregivers to take their children with disabilities to preschools [5].

**UNICEF commissioned several pivotal studies on public financing for ECD that informed planning and budgeting processes.** As the coordinating agency of the local education group, UNICEF facilitated an ECE sub-sector review as part of a larger education sector analysis to analyse the impact of the pandemic [4, 6, 12]. This included drafting of a strategy for optimal use of the EMIS, which currently lacks the ECD Index. The social protection section supported the government on the financial analysis of the spending in ECD which accounted for less than 1 per cent of the entire budget.

**UNICEF facilitated multisectoral coordination to support integrated planning and budgeting of holistic ECD services, but these efforts were still emerging in practice and were not delivered at scale.** UNICEF leadership and comparative advantage was evidenced by its role as co-chair with the government of the IECCD Committee, as a coordinating agency of the ECE technical working group for the local education group, and as a key partner of the newly established NECDOL. UNICEF monitoring data inherent to the level of implementation of ECD multisectoral packages was emerging in 2021, since there were at least two interventions that addressed stimulation for children aged 0–59 months adopted by GoL and ECD. In 2022, UNICEF reported that these ECD packages were integrated in the primary health-care systems, but they were not entirely scaled-up due to a lack of resources. Child protection and ECD centres were key platforms to deliver combined ECD interventions to promote holistic ECD, but not yet scaled-up.

**Figure 6.** Evidence-based theory of change on UNICEF contribution to systems strengthening for ECD, Lesotho

**Data Source:** Triangulation of all evaluation data sources; Legend: blue box = more evidence; orange box = less evidence; yellow box = no evidence and/or not relevant over the reporting period; solid arrow = evidence-based pathway; dashed arrow = hypothesized pathway

During the pandemic, UNICEF mobilized resources to support knowledge, innovation and distance learning using key platforms such as radio and television, and through online learner packs for 135,000 children (55 per cent in pre-primary to grade 4) [4]. Remote teaching and learning were also utilized by the Lesotho College of Education for training teachers as part of the COVID-19 response [3]. In 2023, UNICEF provided assistive technology devices and specialized computer software to support the education of 9,964 children, including 1,164 with

disabilities [6].<sup>9</sup> During the COVID 19 pandemic, UNICEF collaborated with World Vision on a WASH project in schools, promoting hygiene and constructing handwashing facilities to respond to COVID-19. This project targeted young children, ensuring they received adequate information on hand hygiene and COVID-19, which helped improve their health and school attendance. UNICEF also supported the distribution of WASH packages and promoted early learning at home through radio programmes during the pandemic.

9 It is not clear how many of these children are aged 0-8 years from the document reviewed.

**UNICEF contributed to numerous efforts for holistic curriculum and workforce development for ECD.** UNICEF supported pre-school teacher training with the Lesotho College of Education to develop an accredited diploma programme for ECE from the Council of Higher Education, established in 2020. UNICEF supported the MoET to conduct preschool educator training that focused on ECD and how to identify and refer children with disabilities [2]. The number of ECE teachers trained with UNICEF support was 1,776, or 59 per cent of ECE teachers [3]. Key elements of these courses included: approaches to developing learning materials; child development;

educational foundations; child and parent counselling and special educational needs; managing ECD centres and community relations; health, nutrition and safety; as well as making the transition to primary school [1]. The LCO provided technical assistance in revising the national ECCD curriculum to ensure it was child-centred and play-based, and in the development of the Early Learning Development Standards [4, 6]. The curriculum review and development of supporting materials benefited all enrolled pre-school children in Lesotho [5]. For infants, UNICEF supported the development and dissemination of kangaroo mother care guidelines [5].

## Public financing

**EQ1.4. To what extent was UNICEF support for policy reform, public budgeting, and financing for ECD and the ECE sub-sector successful in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0-8 years?**

| 1=Weak                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 2=Emerging                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | 3=Established                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | 4=Advanced                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UNICEF has no influence or role in policy reforms, public budgeting and financing for ECD and ECE sub-sector, with no success in improving the efficiency or effectiveness of spending, and expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0-8 years. | UNICEF plays limited role in improving funding policy reforms, public budgeting and financing for ECD and ECE sub-sector; it has only contributed in one of these areas, but with little success in improving the efficiency or effectiveness of spending, and expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0-8 years. | UNICEF has a clear role of influence in improving funding policy reforms, public budgeting and financing for ECD and ECE sub-sector; it has contributed in most of these areas, with emerging success in improving the efficiency or effectiveness of spending, and expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0-8 years. | UNICEF has a clear role, influence and comparative advantage in improving funding policy reforms, public budgeting and financing for ECD and ECE sub-sector; it has clearly contributed in all of these areas, with highly evident success in improving the efficiency or effectiveness of spending, and expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0-8 years. |

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ1.4

UNICEF's role in influencing funding of ECD/ECE policy reforms and to mobilize resources from non-state actors was notable. However, public budgeting was limited to the social protection sector and was insufficient in fulfilling government policy commitments and there was a heavy reliance on external funding, posing significant challenges to sustainably scale-up access to stimulation and early learning opportunities for children aged 0-8 years.

### DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ1.4

**UNICEF has supported the GoL to develop policy reforms particularly mainstreaming pre-primary education into the education sector and increasing the percentage of budget allocated to ECE.** Reference is made to universal pre-primary in national ECE development plans, strategies and policies, and Lesotho was part of the BELDS programme. UNICEF advocacy strategies and capacity development have been successful in expanding access to opportunities for early learning, but much still needs to be done to strengthen the enabling environment. ECE needs to receive the recommended budget allocation of 10 per cent of the education budget in order to reach universal, equitable access to quality ECE especially for the marginalized children such as

children with disabilities, those living in remote areas and affected by multidimensional poverty (also as an effect of the HIV/AIDS epidemic).

**UNICEF conducted a financial analysis of the government budget and highlighted the alarming low share allocated to ECD, less than 1 per cent of the entire budget [2].** Budget allocation was mentioned a number of times in the analysed policies, suggesting there was growing recognition in Lesotho of the importance of ECCE. In 2018, both the Ministry of Finance and MoET committed to increasing resources in this area in the future. **UNICEF supported policy reform and advocacy led to increased resources for ECD.** Through the Knowledge Innovation Exchange (KIX) project UNICEF was able to mobilize US\$2.5 million from GPE and another US\$2.5 million from RFF to increase access to ECE. UNICEF also advocated for an increase of public spending for social protection which raised from 6.8 per cent to 8.4 per cent of the gross domestic product and contributed to the increase of the child grant programme [3].

**The financing landscape for ECD in Lesotho was characterized by a heavy reliance on external donors, including UNICEF, and a lack of consistent government investment.** Government funding for ECD remained critically low and insufficient to drive significant visible improvement in the sector. The main lifeline of ECD funding in the country is US\$5 million, secured by the MoET through a partnership between RFF, GPE and UNICEF on the School Readiness Initiative. With UNICEF involvement, the School Readiness Initiative has shifted from a narrower focus on preparing children for school through the expansion of ECE, particularly reception classes linked to primary education, to a broader integrated approach that addresses broader aspects of children's well-being in school, including health, nutrition and safety. If UNICEF were to withdraw its support from ECD programmes in Lesotho, the impact would be profound and detrimental. The reliance on UNICEF for funding and support is significant, and many stakeholders both within and outside government have expressed concerns about the sustainability of ECD initiatives without this crucial backing.

## System strengthening for integrated ECD approach

**EQ2.** To what extent has UNICEF leveraged the integrated ECD approach to support countries in building capacities and systems to adapt, accelerate, and scale-up efforts to strengthen coordination across sectors in support of holistic development of young children aged 0-8 years?

### External coherence

**EQ2.1.** To what extent is there a shared vision and conceptual understanding between UNICEF and government counterparts on (i) determinants of school readiness and learning in the early years; and (ii) the efficacy of the integrated / multi-sectoral ECD approach?

| 1=Weak                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | 2=Emerging                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 3=Established                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | 4=Advanced                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| There is no shared vision and conceptual understanding between UNICEF and government counterparts. This lack of shared vision and understanding hinders the effectiveness of UNICEF efforts in building capacities and systems to support holistic development of young children aged 0-8 years. | There is limited/emerging shared vision and conceptual understanding between UNICEF and government counterparts (in one area, but not well aligned). This limited shared vision and understanding may result in only partial success of UNICEF in building capacities and systems to support holistic development of young children aged 0-8 years. | There is an established shared vision and conceptual understanding between UNICEF and government counterparts on determinants (in areas (i) and (ii), but with space for alignment to improve). This emerging shared vision and understanding is a positive indicator for the potential success of UNICEF efforts in building capacities and systems to support holistic development of young children from 0-8 years old. | There is a clear shared vision and conceptual understanding between UNICEF and government counterparts (in both (i) and (ii) areas, and is well aligned). This shared vision and understanding indicate a strong foundation for the success of UNICEF efforts in building capacities and systems to support holistic development of young children aged 0-8 years. |

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ2.1

UNICEF and GoL shared a common vision and a strong understanding of the importance of investing in the early years and adopting a multisectoral approach to prepare children for school. However, staff turnover and capacity gaps remained at decentralized levels in implementing the integrated approach.

### DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ2.1

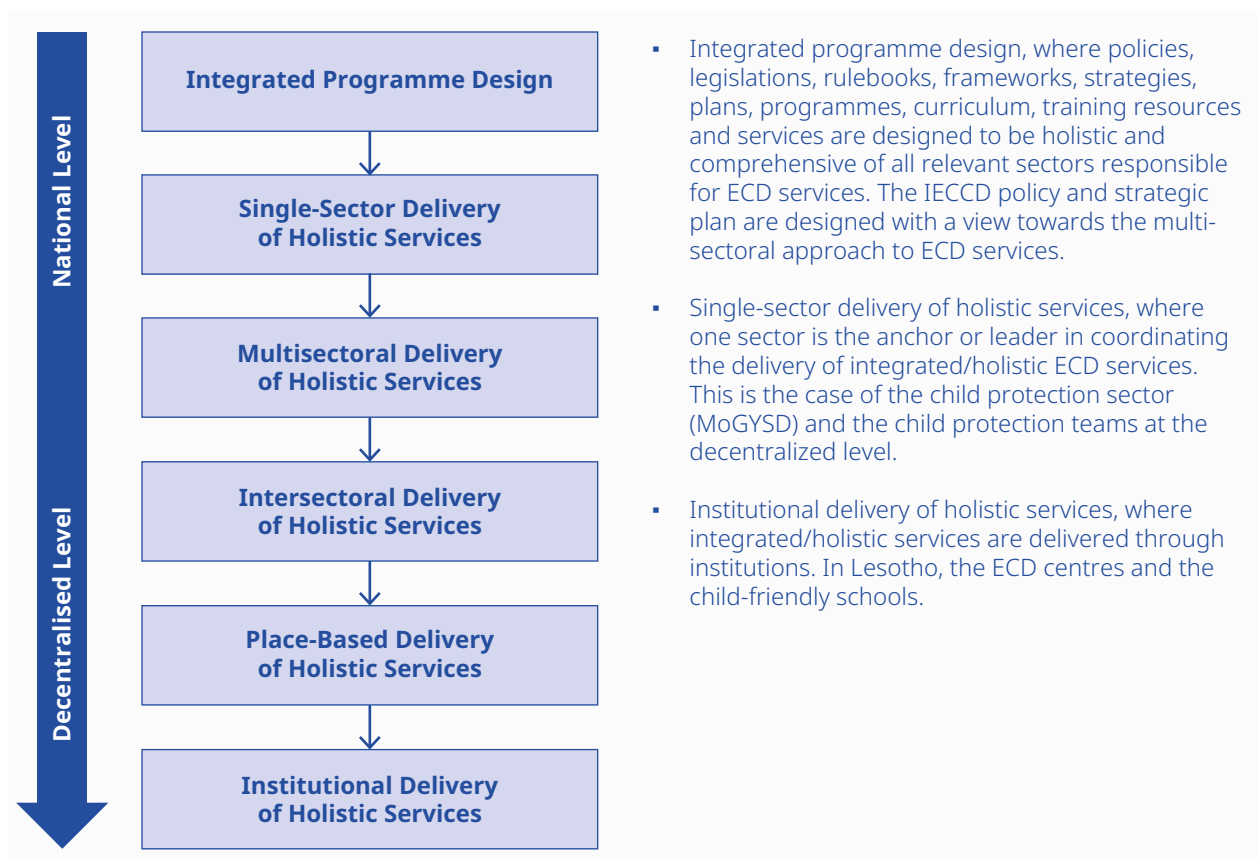
**UNICEF has engaged all relevant sectors in its multisectoral approach to ECD programming in Lesotho at the national and decentralized levels, which indicates a strong shared vision and understanding.** The LCO utilized three approaches to facilitate the integration of ECD services (see Figure 7).

**Child protection was a strong cross-sectoral entry point at the district level due to the collaboration in the ECD centres as entry points for a number of services for young children.** In districts, there are child protection teams and village workers assigned to households, one village worker

for 240 households. Their role is to ensure that children receive all their required vaccines, monitor the child's development, and ensure the child is attending school. If the family needs a waiver, the village chief is able to link to the MoGYSD. Some events organized at the subnational level are designed in an integrated manner, such as the ECD days where health, nutrition, education and child protection activities intersect.

**While there was coherence between UNICEF and government counterparts on the value of the integrated ECD approach and school readiness, knowledge and capacity gaps were found at district level.** Key informants noted that continuous sensitization and capacity building interventions would reinforce existing knowledge and ensure a shared understanding among different ministries and staff levels on the integrated approach, while also addressing issues of staff turnover and political change. While UNICEF contribution has been reported and acknowledged on the integrated ECD approach, government informants noted that more investment and continued efforts are required to sustain the momentum of this approach in practice and at scale.

**Figure 7.** Example approaches to integration and delivery of holistic ECD services in Lesotho



## Continuum of services

**EQ2.2. To what extent has the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach been effective in promoting a continuum of learning opportunities in the early years and school readiness?**

| 1=Weak                                                                                                                                                        | 2=Emerging                                                                                                                                              | 3=Established                                                                                                                                                        | 4=Advanced                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach has not been effective in promoting a continuum of learning opportunities in the early years and school readiness. | The integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach has been limited in promoting a continuum of learning opportunities in the early years and school readiness. | The integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach has been moderately effective in promoting a continuum of learning opportunities in the early years and school readiness. | The integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach has been highly effective in promoting a continuum of learning opportunities in the early years and school readiness. |

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ2.2

UNICEF has effectively contributed to the provision of a continuum of ECD services and parenting support programmes in Lesotho with the greatest variety of services for children aged 3–5 years. However, national coverage of learning opportunities and stimulation for children aged 0–2 years, as well as parenting support programmes were limited due to insufficient resources. No recent national data was available on children's access to pre-primary and FGD participants reported limited access to early learning opportunities and play materials. Integration and communication between relevant sector services to monitor children's developmental outcomes, particularly at age 3 years, remains underdeveloped.

and provide psychosocial support during COVID-19 pandemic. The documents reviewed report the number of children and caregivers reached via the ECD supported programmes, but inconsistent data on pre-primary enrolment makes assessment of the contribution to school readiness challenging.

**UNICEF supported a comprehensive set of dual-generation services and programmes to support both parents/caregivers and children of different ages.** A total of 17 different UNICEF-supported ECD services were identified for young children and their parents in Lesotho (see Table 6). A greater variety of UNICEF-supported services were made available for children aged 3–5 years (6 services) and children aged 6–8 years (6 services), while children aged 0–2 years had access to fewer types of services (3 services) (see Table 6). Children aged 0–2 years benefited from UNICEF-supported efforts with the GoL to provide kangaroo care, home visits, and developmental monitoring. The greater diversity of services for children aged 3–5 years reflects the transition from home-based care to formal preschool and the introduction of violence prevention programmes that are more appropriate for this age group, as well as parenting programmes focused on positive parenting and school readiness. Children aged 6–8 years benefitted from similar UNICEF-supported services as children aged 3–5 years, but with additional services to support their participation in primary school and inclusive education services. UNICEF also supported ECD-related services that covered all children aged 0–18 years that benefited young children, including social protection schemes (such as cash grants) and digital parenting support resources.

### DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ2.2

**The integrated ECD approach supported by UNICEF has been moderately effective in expanding learning opportunities and promoting school readiness given the emerging phase of programme maturity.** UNICEF has promoted the multisectoral approach at the policy and programme levels, and established platforms of the IECCD Committee and NECDOL that are chaired by the government and aim to gather state and non-state actors. UNICEF has supported the government to expand access to pre-primary education and improve quality; include children with disabilities and improve teachers' skills; engage families and communities; implement responsive feeding, kangaroo care and positive parenting programmes for caregivers, with gender as a cross-cutting theme; support families and children with social protection instruments;

**The coverage of UNICEF-supported ECD programmes varied by intervention type and sectors engaged.**

According to UNICEF monitoring data, the LCO reported coverage of early stimulation and responsive care, developmental monitoring and the early identification of children with disabilities were universally available in 2022 and 2023, including through digital platforms. However, coverage

of parenting support programmes was limited in geographic scope. There were no mechanisms found to support the transition of children from the care of the health sector to the education sector at age 3 years. At age 6 years, the reception classes aim at ensuring continuity from pre-primary to primary education.

**Table 6.** Continuum of ECD services supported by UNICEF Lesotho, 2018-2023

| Services by age group                                                  | Available Services |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Children aged 0-2 years</b>                                         |                    |
| Kangaroo care                                                          | X                  |
| Home visits                                                            | X                  |
| Developmental monitoring                                               | X                  |
| Care for child development/infant and young child feeding              |                    |
| Playful parenting programme                                            |                    |
| Early learning activities (ECD kits, nurseries, childcare centres)     |                    |
| <b>Children aged 3-5 years</b>                                         |                    |
| Home visits                                                            |                    |
| Developmental monitoring                                               | X                  |
| Preschool, kindergarten                                                | X                  |
| Positive parenting programme                                           | X                  |
| Playful parenting programme                                            | X                  |
| School feeding                                                         |                    |
| Early learning activities (ECD kits, digital platforms)                | X                  |
| WASH in preschools                                                     |                    |
| Assistive devices, inclusive education                                 |                    |
| Violence prevention in schools, mental health and psychosocial support | X                  |
| <b>Children aged 6-8 years</b>                                         |                    |
| Primary school                                                         | X                  |
| Positive parenting programmes                                          | X                  |
| School feeding                                                         |                    |
| Early learning activities (ECD kits, digital platforms)                | X                  |

| Services by age group                                                  | Available Services |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| WASH in primary schools                                                | X                  |
| Assistive devices, inclusive education                                 | X                  |
| Violence prevention in schools, mental health and psychosocial support | X                  |
| <b>Children aged 0-18 years</b>                                        |                    |
| Social protection schemes (child grants, cash transfers)               | X                  |
| Digital parenting support resources                                    | X                  |

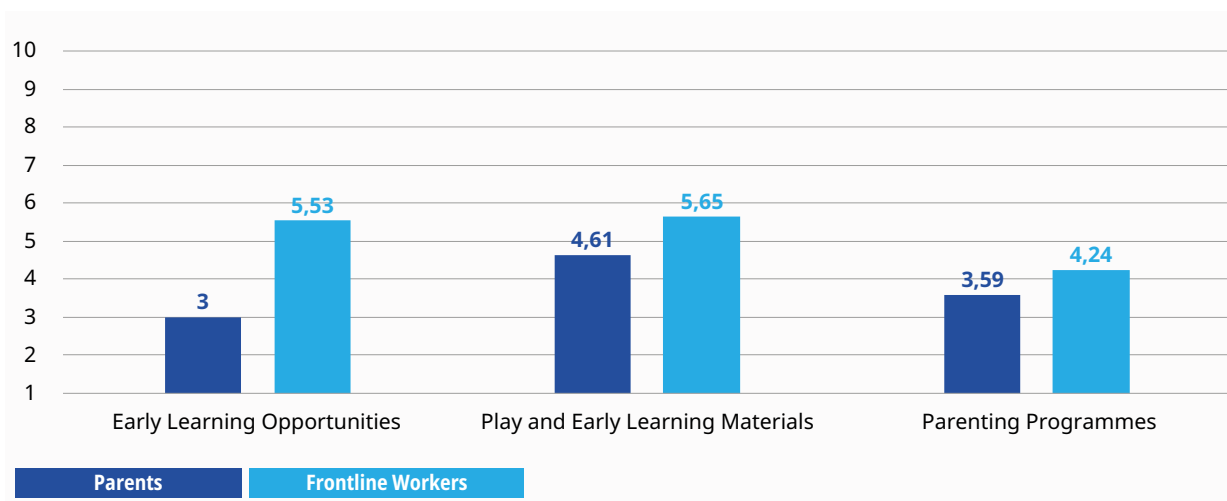
**There is no recent national data available on the net enrollment rate in early learning, or on children's participation and attendance rates in pre-primary. Thus, it is not possible to determine trends in children's access to early learning opportunities in Lesotho at this time.** According to [MICS data](#) in 2018, only 46 per cent of children aged 36–59 months attended an ECE programme in Lesotho, but no recent data is available. The government of Lesotho has provided learning and stimulation opportunities for children in the early years with some continuity, but with less emphasis on children aged 0–2 years.

**The evaluation found differing perceptions and challenges in coverage of ECD services among parents/caregivers and frontline workers.**

Access to early learning opportunities received low to moderate scorecards among FGD participants; the average scorecard for parents was 3 out of 10, and

5.5 for frontline workers (all preschool teachers) (see [Figure 8](#)). Parents talked about the possibility of sending their children to preschools, but that required money they did not always have for uniforms, food, tuition fees and transportation. Some preschools have infrastructure and safety issues, poor hygiene, and in some cases the parents perceived that the teachers could not take adequate care of the children. ECCD centres were a preferred solution for parents compared to home-based provision. Teachers had a better opinion of the early learning opportunities for children of preschool age. They confirmed the costs of the preschools that posed a main barrier, together with the condition that children must have attended other years of preschool in order to enter the reception class in some cases, and there was a limit of 30 children per class. Where preschools were available, teachers highlighted the lack of playgrounds and libraries. Some preschools did not have enough learning materials or an adequate infrastructure.

**Figure 8.** Average scorecards from parents and frontline workers on access to ECD services and resources in Lesotho



**Average scorecard (scale of 1 to 10):** 1=never true, 5=sometimes true, 10=mostly true. N=92 participants, 7 sessions

Fifty-seven per cent parents reported they had access to playthings at home in 2018, and only 3 per cent reported they had books [7]. Access to play and early learning materials received low to moderate scorecards among FGD participants; the average scorecard for parents was 4.6 out of 10, and 5.7 for frontline workers (see Figure 8). Both parents and teachers in Lesotho reported a significant lack of play and early learning materials. Financial constraints limited access to commercially produced toys, leading parents to rely on hand-made toys. Both groups expressed a desire for more diverse and stimulating toys and books. Teachers confirmed the inadequacy of play materials in preschools and the absence of dedicated outdoor play areas. While creative solutions like homemade toys were employed, they were insufficient to meet children's needs. Teachers, similar to parents, agreed that some preschools do not have enough (play) materials and adequate infrastructure.

Access to parenting programmes received low scorecards among FGD participants; the average scorecard for parents was 3.6 out of 10, and 4.2 for frontline workers (see Figure 8). Parenting programmes in Lesotho were limited, with parents relying heavily on family members for childcare. Teachers confirmed the lack

of dedicated parenting programmes and noted that existing services were often limited and inaccessible due to the cost. There was a clear need for expanded and diversified services to support parents in areas of childcare, education, health, and nutrition.

**UNICEF-supported parenting programmes included integrated interventions encompassing health, nutrition, education, and social protection sectors, although not at scale.**

Parenting education interventions focused on a wide range of parenting practices, including responsive feeding, the importance of early learning, positive parenting and kangaroo care, and on improved parent/caregiver mental health [1–6]. The programmes targeting adolescents and young women included antenatal care and sexual and reproductive health (2018). With partners, UNICEF provided remote health counseling, COVID-19 information, and psychosocial support through teleconsultations and that resulted in 325 adolescent mothers (93 per cent of target) and their children provided with remote teleconsultation services. However, there was no data on the total number of mothers, fathers and caregivers reached through UNICEF-supported parenting programmes from 2018 to 2023.

## Quality and relevance of services

### EQ2.3. To what extent is UNICEF work on integrated/multi-sectoral ECD and school readiness meeting the needs of children and caregivers?

| 1=Weak                                                                                                                  | 2=Limited                                                                                                                                                    | 3=Emerging                                                                                                                                                      | 4=Advanced                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UNICEF work on integrated/ multi-sectoral ECD and school readiness is not meeting the needs of children and caregivers. | UNICEF work on integrated/ multi-sectoral ECD and school readiness is meeting the needs of only a small portion children and caregivers (below 30 per cent). | UNICEF work on integrated/ multi-sectoral ECD and school readiness is meeting the needs of a moderate portion children and caregivers (between 30–70 per cent). | UNICEF work on integrated/ multi-sectoral ECD and school readiness is meeting the needs of most children and caregivers (71 per cent and above). |

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ2.3

UNICEF has helped Lesotho to address the needs of young children and parents/caregivers, especially for children aged 3–8 years, and for children with disabilities. UNICEF efforts to improve the quality of ECE services contributed by building the capacities of frontline workers on playful teaching and inclusive education techniques for pre-primary. While 73 per cent of children were developmentally on track in 2018, it was not clear from the available data if UNICEF target of 100 per cent would be reached by 2025. The percentage of children receiving early stimulation and responsive care from their parents or caregivers was only 28 per cent in 2018, but more recent data are needed to assess the success of the strategies implemented during the evaluation period. Further, a lack of recent national data on children's developmental status and parent/caregiver practices limited the assessment of UNICEF contribution in the achievement of these results since the pandemic.

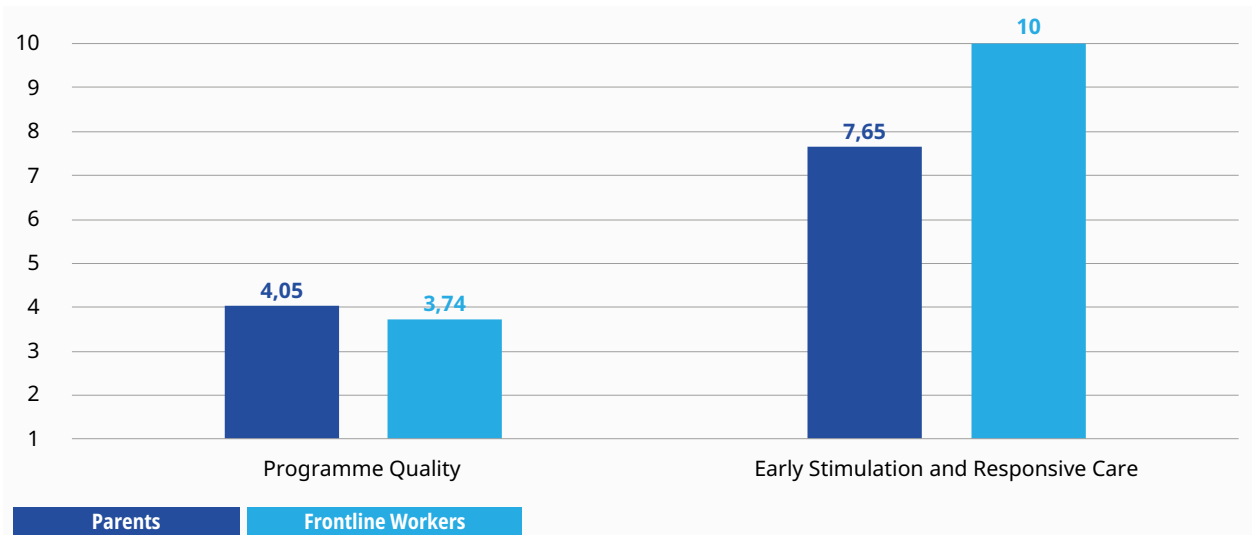
### DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ2.3

**UNICEF support has been crucial in strengthening frontline worker capacities to deliver high quality ECD services.** From 2018-2023, UNICEF collaborated with national actors like the Lesotho College of Education for quality assurance and supported the formulation of a new play-based, pre-primary education curriculum and ECD diploma, and on the inclusion of children with disability. UNICEF also supported training for health care providers. In 2018, UNICEF reported that teacher knowledge of ECD increased from 6.4 per cent in 2015 to 20 per cent in 2018 [1]. In 2022, UNICEF reported there was improved teaching capacity in child-centred and play-based learning among 401 pre-school teachers (395 female, 6 male) [5]. However, there was lack of consistency of the teacher trainings, and there was limited data on frontline worker outcomes within the documents reviewed.

**Despite UNICEF efforts to strengthen the quality of holistic ECD services, the evaluation found diverse perceptions among parents/caregivers and frontline workers on this topic.** The quality of

ECD programmes and services received low scorecards; the average scorecard for parents was 4.1 out of 10, and 3.7 for frontline workers (see Figure 9). This suggests that the quality of ECD programmes and services in Lesotho was not good, as reported by both teachers and parents. Key issues included poor infrastructure, inadequate resources, and insufficient teacher training, leading to a perceived low quality of education and care. Both groups highlighted the need for better building conditions, more play and learning materials, and improved teacher qualifications. Despite some positive aspects like community engagement and early stimulation activities, significant investment was needed to address these deficiencies and ensure quality early learning experiences for all children in Lesotho. Parents expressed a need for more preschools, particularly free ones, and public play spaces. They also highlighted the need for qualified teachers, school feeding programmes, age-appropriate toilets, and safe learning environments. Health concerns included a lack of accessible and affordable healthcare and nutritious food.

**Figure 9.** Average scorecards from parents and frontline workers on quality of ECD services in Lesotho



**Average scorecard (scale of 1 to 10):** 1=never true, 5=sometimes true, 10=mostly true. N=92 participants, 7 sessions

**In Lesotho, only 28 per cent of parents/care-givers (29 per cent of mothers and 27 per cent of fathers) were providing early stimulation and responsive care to their children in 2018. However, FGD participants who were exposed to UNICEF-supported parenting programmes reported relatively high scorecards for these practices, which suggests a positive contribution toward improving this result.** Early stimulation and responsive care received high scorecards; the average scorecard for parents was 7.7 out of 10, and 10 for frontline workers (see Figure 9). Both parents and teachers in Lesotho recognized the importance of early stimulation and responsive care for children’s development. Parents and teachers

engaged regularly in activities like singing and playing with children to stimulate their brain development, reinforce school learning, and to help them relax. Teachers also emphasized the importance of these activities for conveying messages and helping children understand quickly.

**Seventy-three per cent of children were developmentally on track in Lesotho in 2018.** However, there is no recent data to assess UNICEF contribution on ECD outcomes for children. Given the lack of resources for scaling ECD programmes and services in Lesotho, it is plausible that the country may not meet UNICEF target of 100 per cent of young children being developmentally on track by 2025.

## Internal coherence

**EQ2.4. To what extent does UNICEF programme staff have a shared vision and understanding of the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach, coordination mechanisms and capacities across sectors to increase access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years and to support the holistic development of young children and their school readiness?**

| 1=Weak                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 2=Limited                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | 3=Emerging                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | 4=Advanced                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UNICEF does not have a shared vision and understanding of the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach, coordination mechanisms, and capacities across sectors; there is no stated vision/strategic plan for ECD. | UNICEF has a partially shared vision and understanding of the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach, coordination mechanisms, and capacities across sectors; there is a stated vision/strategic plan for ECD (in two sectors, but with several gaps in other sectors). | UNICEF has a developed shared vision and understanding of the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach, coordination mechanisms, and capacities across sectors; there is a clearly stated vision/strategic plan for ECD (in three sectors, but with room for improvement). | UNICEF has a fully developed shared vision and understanding of the integrated/multi-sectoral ECD approach, strong coordination mechanisms, and capacities across sectors; there is a clearly stated vision/strategic plan for ECD (in all relevant sectors). |

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ2.4

UNICEF programme staff have shared understanding of the integrated ECD approach and a common vision of the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration. However, implementation of the integrated ECD approach was constrained by a lack of clear governance structures and processes for planning, resourcing, monitoring and evaluating the approach. Challenges were found in areas such as coordination, resource allocation, accountability, leadership, and reporting systems.

### DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ2.4

**UNICEF programme staff definitions of the integrated approach were shared and mainly referred to the collaboration of multiple sectors responsible for optimal child development.**

The key informants describe the “integrated ECD approach” as a holistic model that brings together various sectors and services to ensure the well-being and development of children. They emphasized the importance of collaboration and coordination among different stakeholders, including government ministries, NGOs, and communities. All informants highlighted the importance of a multi-sectoral approach, involving various government ministries (health, education, social development, agriculture) and

partners like NGOs and communities. They believed that addressing the diverse factors influencing child development requires a collaborative effort.

**According to UNICEF key informants, the integrated ECD approach aims to provide a comprehensive package of services for children, including health, nutrition, education, protection, and social protection.** The goal is to address all aspects of a child's development. Key informants criticized the traditional practice of working in silos, where different interventions are delivered separately without coordination. They advocated for integrated planning, implementation, and reporting to maximize impact and avoid duplication of efforts. Several informants also recognized the crucial role of communities, particularly village health workers and caregivers, in implementing the integrated ECD approach and believed that engaging communities ensures services reach the most vulnerable and marginalized children.

**The LCO CPD was organized around a life-cycle approach to integrate programmes across the sections for children aged 0-8 years, and for children aged 9-18 years [8]. The LCO also had an**

**ECD task force in a deliberate effort to implement the integrated approach.** However, UNICEF key informants noted there were inadequate governance and accountability mechanisms to facilitate internal programme planning, implementation, and M&E of the integrated ECD approach. For example, the documents reviewed do not specifically describe the systems in place for the internal implementation of the ECD integrated approach. While UNICEF promotes an integrated ECD approach externally, some informants pointed to a lack of internal coordination and integration within the LCO. Different sections often work in silos, with separate work plans and limited collaboration during implementation. The absence of a single integrated reporting system made it difficult to track progress and measure the collective impact of the integrated ECD approach. Data was often collected separately by different sectors, making it challenging to assess overall effectiveness. Some informants mentioned instances of resistance to sharing resources or collaborating fully. This reluctance to work together can undermine the effectiveness of the integrated ECD approach.

## Efficiency

**EQ2.5. Are UNICEF resources (financial and human) and partnership arrangements well positioned to accelerate and scale-up efforts to strengthen integrated ECD programmes and the ECE sub-sector? Are the partnership arrangements strategic and efficient?**

| 1=Weak                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | 2=Limited                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | 3=Emerging                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | 4=Advanced                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UNICEF resources and partnership arrangements are not well-positioned to accelerate and scale-up efforts to strengthen integrated ECD programmes and the ECE subsector; partnerships are ad hoc and have received little attention. | UNICEF resources and partnership arrangements are limited in their positioning to accelerate and scale-up efforts to strengthen integrated ECD programmes and the ECE subsector; there are some instances of good practices of partnerships. | UNICEF resources and partnership arrangements are moderately well-positioned to accelerate and scale-up efforts to strengthen integrated ECD programmes and the ECE subsector; systemic partnerships are increasingly utilized and wide in scope. | UNICEF resources and partnership arrangements are well-positioned to accelerate and scale-up efforts to strengthen integrated ECD programmes and the ECE subsector; there are consistent and systemic good practices of the use of partnerships. |

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ2.5

UNICEF human and financial resources were not sufficient for supporting the expanding government vision for ECD. Less than 15 per cent of UNICEF Goal Areas 1 and 2 resources were allocated to ECD and ECE programming from 2018-2023. Allocating additional resources specifically for implementing the integrated ECD approach could stabilize and scale-up UNICEF efforts. UNICEF presence, leadership, and convening role for ECD were widely acknowledged by its partners as a strong comparative advantage to the organization. However, partnership could be further enhanced to ensure efficiency in ECD programme delivery, especially in emergencies.

## DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ2.5

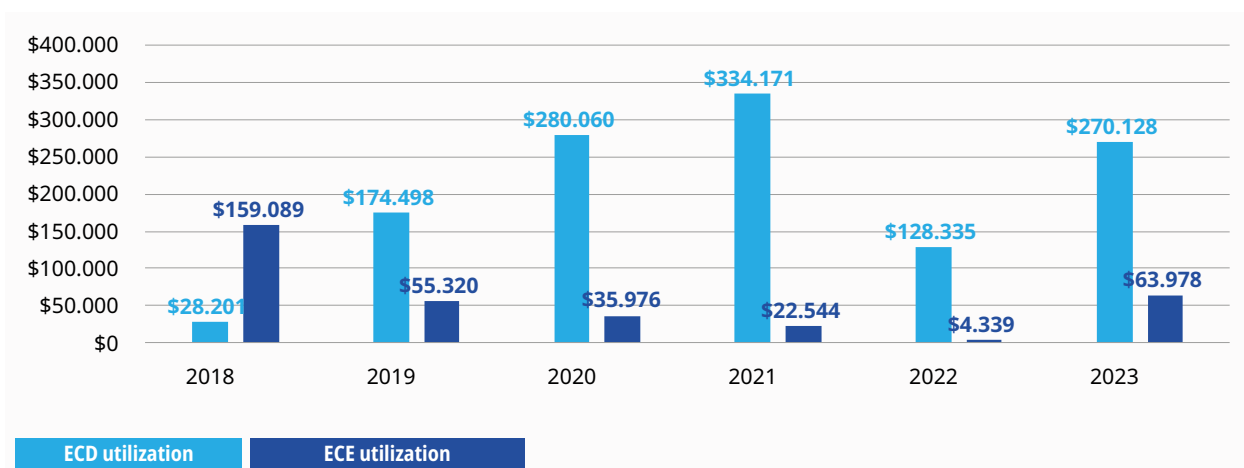
**In terms of human resources, the shortage of personnel could limit UNICEF ability to adequately support the government's expanding ECD programme.** The LCO has one dedicated ECD specialist that reports to the chief of education, as well as specialists from social policy, child protection, health and nutrition that contribute to ECD programming [16]. Key informants mention that there has only been one ECD specialist for a considerable period, highlighting a potential vulnerability if that individual is unavailable.

**In terms of financial resources, UNICEF investment in ECD programming was higher than ECE programming. From 2018 to 2023, UNICEF utilized a total of US\$1.2 million for ECD**

**programming, compared to US\$341,246 for ECE programming.** Annual utilization for ECD programming increased steadily until 2022, when it dropped considerably before rebounding in 2023 (see Figure 10). By contrast, annual utilization for ECE programming steadily decreased from 2018 to 2022, before rebounding in 2023.

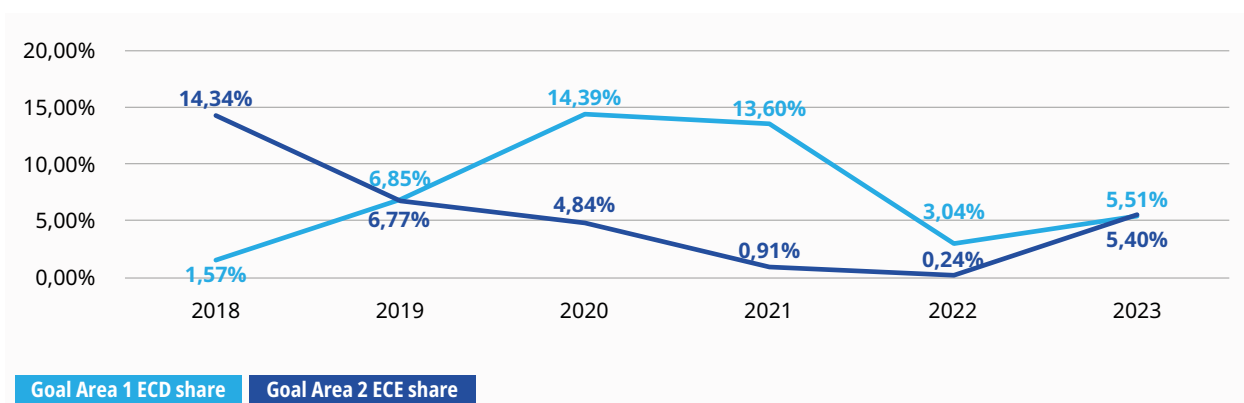
**From 2018 to 2023, less than 15 per cent of the LCO annual budget was allocated to ECD or ECE programming** (see Figure 11). In 2023, the share going to ECD and ECE programming was about 5 per cent, which is below UNICEF global requirement of 10 per cent for ECE programming. The dramatic drop from a peak of 14 per cent in 2020 going to ECD programming to 3 per cent in 2022 suggests funds were mobilized for the COVID-19 pandemic response.

**Figure 10.** Total investment in ECD and ECE, UNICEF Lesotho, 2018-2023



**Data source:** UNICEF, Insight, 2018-2023; see Annex 9 for an explanation of the methodology for extracting financial data

**Figure 11.** Percentage of goal area funds allocated to ECD and ECE, UNICEF Lesotho, 2018-2023



**Data source:** UNICEF, Insight, 2018-2023; see Annex 9 for an explanation of the methodology for extracting financial data

**The LCO annual workplan for 2020 clearly demonstrated increased investments in ECD and ECE programming to support multisectoral coordination, capacity building for ECE and in the design of communication materials to support COVID-19 response** [9]. However, UNICEF respondents believed that more resources should be allocated specifically to improve the implementation of the ECD integrated approach. While UNICEF has successfully leveraged external funding for ECD, there were concerns about the sustainability of programmes and the organization's capacity to provide direct financial support. The reliance on donor funding can create uncertainty and limit UNICEF ability to respond to emerging needs or scale up interventions independently.

**UNICEF comparative advantage for ECD was clear to informants, although they provided suggestions for strengthening the effectiveness of UNICEF partnerships.** Informants universally agreed that UNICEF had a strong comparative advantage for ECD because of its focus on children's rights, its engagement over the entire childhood period (0–18 years), its programming areas which included

all ECD sectors, its recognized expertise and capacity to influence government's decisions, its convening and resource mobilization roles, and its good visibility also at decentralized level with community members.

**However, interviews with government and development partners highlighted several challenges to working with UNICEF.** A major issue was the timeframe for project implementation, which often required rapid implementation over a very short duration. Another challenge was the procurement process, which, as several implementing partners pointed out, can be cumbersome and sometimes leads to delays in implementation. There were also delays in communication, which affected the timely disbursement of funds and project implementation. Financial support from UNICEF was also limited as it does not cover salaries, which can be a significant burden on partner organizations. There were also problems with the sustainability of infrastructure projects, as there is often insufficient budget for maintenance and repairs. Finally, the process of accessing support through UNICEF portal was reportedly slow, which was problematic in emergency situations.

## Sustainability

**EQ2.6. To what extent did UNICEF support or implement measures to enhance the sustainability and utility of the key strategies, programmes, and/or interventions aimed at expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years?**

| 1=Weak                                                                                                                                                                                              | 2=Limited                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 3=Emerging                                                                                                                                                                                       | 4=Advanced                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The extent to which UNICEF supports or implements measures to enhance the sustainability and utility of the key strategies, programmes, and/or interventions is very limited (one or two measures). | The extent to which UNICEF supports or implements measures to enhance the sustainability and utility of the key strategies, programmes, and/or interventions is somewhat limited (three or four measures). | The extent to which UNICEF supports or implements measures to enhance the sustainability and utility of the key strategies, programmes, and/or interventions is moderate (five or six measures). | The extent to which UNICEF supports or implements measures to enhance the sustainability and utility of the key strategies, programmes, and/or interventions is significant (seven or more measures). |

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ2.6

The evaluation found sector specific and multisectoral ECD policies and plans that will likely ensure the sustainability of UNICEF efforts in Lesotho. UNICEF has supported the creation of an enabling environment by strengthening ministerial leadership and capacity, guiding the development of policies and legislation, and facilitating the implementation of key strategies aimed at expanding access to early childhood stimulation and learning opportunities. These efforts have contributed to the sustainability of ongoing reform processes. However, continued advocacy is needed to encourage the GoL to increase public investment in ECD and ECE and reduce its dependence on external funding, both of which pose serious risks to sustainability.

## DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ2.6

**Numerous policies and plans adopted by the government for ensuring the sustainability of ECD services that focused mainly on the enabling environment were supported by UNICEF.** First, UNICEF contributed to the enactment of the Persons with Disability Equity Act in 2021, which facilitates the implementation of the Inclusive Education Policy (2018) [18, 19]. These documents mandate the provision of social protection measures and inclusive education for all children with disabilities, but do not elaborate on the unique needs of children aged 0–8 years. For example, early childhood interventions, family-centred care and the detection and treatment of early childhood developmental delays are not included in the mandates. UNICEF also contributed to the Lesotho National Prevention and Response Plan on Violence Against Children and Youth, which is a comprehensive multisectoral strategy for children aged 0–18 years that mandates multiple ministries

(e.g., social development, health, education) to implement violence prevention and response mechanisms [6, 20]. UNICEF contributed to the Lesotho Food and Nutrition Strategy and Costed Action Plan, which is a costed, multisectoral ECD plan to reduce stunting and malnutrition [17]. Finally, during COVID-19, in 2020, UNICEF convened the education stakeholders through the education in emergencies working group and the local education group and jointly developed a national education-sector response plan that included preschools.

**While achievements in policy adoption were noteworthy and will support sustainability, the implementation of policies and plans remained a persistent and serious challenge for the government due to a lack of sufficient resources.** Key informants noted that UNICEF continuous advocacy for investment in ECD programming is required to reduce the reliance on donor funding for basic services that should be provided by the government.

## Programme results from integrated ECD approach

**EQ3.** To what extent has the integrated ECD approach been successful in promoting ECD and school readiness among caregivers and children aged 0–8 years in Lesotho?

### Data availability

**EQ3.1.** To what extent do countries collect and utilize reliable and disaggregated data on caregiver practices, children's developmental status and on children's participation and learning in ECE for programme planning and improvement?

| 1=Weak                                                                                                  | 2=Limited                                                                                                       | 3=Emerging                                                                                                       | 4=Advanced                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Two or fewer indicators are collected and available; data does not differentiate for particular groups. | Three to four indicators are collected and available; data does differentiate for one to two particular groups. | Five to six indicators are collected and available; data does differentiate for three to four particular groups. | Seven or more indicators are collected and available; data does differentiate for five to six particular groups. |

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ3.1

The availability and quality of data was inadequate to fully assess the outcomes of UNICEF work as it relates to strengthening caregiver practices and ECD. One explanation for the lack of data is that the implementation of the integrated ECD approach is at an emerging stage, given insufficient public resources. Another explanation was due to the high costs of data collection, especially national surveys such as the MICS, which has not been collected in Lesotho since 2018.

## DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ3.1

**There was a lack of data on parent and caregiver outcomes in Lesotho.** The information on parent and caregiver outcomes is descriptive and theoretically inferred based upon the content of the educational and communication resources shared through SBC and parenting education interventions. The lack of data makes it difficult to assess UNICEF contribution to strengthened parenting practices.

**There was limited data on child development outcomes and school readiness.** The ECD Index

was available only for year 2018 [7]. Similarly, data is available only for 2018 on the attendance rate in early learning programmes for children aged 36-49 months, which was 46 per cent, with vast inequalities in access by income (83 per cent among children in the richest households versus 20 per cent in the poorest households) [7]. At preschool, especially in the formal setting there was no tracking of child protection issues. In terms of disaggregated data, there are no data on how many children with disability are or are not at school, and there is not a strong M&E framework on disability inclusion.

## Results achieved

**EQ3.2. To what extent has UNICEF work met ECD and ECE objectives and targets for caregivers and young children as it relates to stimulation and learning in the early years?**

| 0 = Insufficient Data                                           | 1=Weak                                                                           | 2=Limited                                                                             | 3=Emerging                                                                        | 4=Advanced                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| There was insufficient data to answer this evaluation question. | UNICEF work has met less than 20 per cent of ECD and ECE objectives and targets. | UNICEF work has met between 21 and 40 per cent of ECD and ECE objectives and targets. | UNICEF work has met between 40-80 per cent of ECD and ECE objectives and targets. | UNICEF work has above 80 per cent of ECD and ECE objectives and targets. |

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ3.2

This evaluation was unable to answer EQ3.3 due to a lack of relevant data (*see Table 7*).

## DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ3.2

**Table 7.** Overview of UNICEF results for ECD-ECE programming in Lesotho, status as of 2023

| Key Performance Indicator                                                                                                                           | Baseline (2018) | Target (2023) | Result (2023)                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------------------------|
| Gross enrolment of children in pre-primary education.                                                                                               | 42              | 55            | Insufficient data <sup>1</sup> |
| Percentage of monetary and multidimensionally deprived children in poor family that are directly benefited from social assistance programmes (cash) | 32.8% (85,308)  | 60% (156,185) | Insufficient data <sup>2</sup> |

**Data Source:** CPD 2018 [8]

<sup>1</sup> Data source for this KPI is Education Sector Reports. Forty-six per cent of children aged 36-49 months attended an ECE programme in 2018, but this is not the same KPI listed in the table.

<sup>2</sup> Data source for this KPI is the National Information System for Social Assistance. UNICEF advocacy contributed to an increase of the child grant programme coverage from 41,049 households in 2019 to 50,321 in 2020, and the continuation of the Orphans and Vulnerable Children Bursary covering 23,845 vulnerable children.

## Evaluability

**EQ3.3.** To what extent has the ToC for UNICEF work in ECD and ECE held true in terms of the logic and pathways to results for children and caregivers? What are the major contributions by UNICEF in the achievement of results?

| 1=Weak                                                                            | 2=Limited                                                                                                            | 3=Emerging                                                                                              | 4=Advanced                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The theory of change has not held true and the pathways to results are not clear. | The theory of change has held true to some extent and some pathways to results are clear while others are not clear. | The theory of change has mostly held true and most pathways to results are clear, but some gaps remain. | The theory of change has held true and pathways to results are clear. |

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ3.3

In Lesotho, the major contribution of UNICEF at this stage of programme maturity was in strengthening the enabling environment for integrated ECD policies and plans, and ECD-sensitive sector policies and plans. The evidence trail falls off when tracing the contribution of UNICEF on frontline worker capacities, parenting practices and child impacts due to a lack of data. The ToC for UNICEF work on the integrated ECD approach was retroactively developed through this evaluation using an evidence-based contribution analysis of all data sources. The evaluation helped to clarify what these outcomes and impacts could be for each sector, as well as the collective outcomes impacts of the integrated ECD approach.

From 2018 to 2023, the LCO worked with its partners to address stunting and infant mortality, early learning loss associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, violence against children and insufficient parenting practices (see *Figure 12*, situation column). These threats to ECD and ECE were addressed through a multisectoral approach and a combination of strategies, including: partnerships, capacity development and technical assistance, advocacy and communication, policy and programme design, evidence generation, resource mobilization, and innovations (see *Figure 12*, multisectoral approach and programme strategies columns).

UNICEF contributed to the enabling environment through interventions on ministerial leadership and the design of policies and legislation, which contributed to a multisectoral policy on disability inclusion and to a multisectoral child protection plan (see *Figure 12*, inputs/interventions and outputs columns). UNICEF also contributed to system strengthening for ECD and ECE through interventions on planning and budgeting, multisectoral coordination, curriculum development, workforce development, and family and community engagement (see *Figure 12*, inputs/interventions and outputs columns). These interventions contributed to increased external financial resources and access to ECD/ECE services for parents/caregivers and children, but on a limited scale in the most marginalized communities due to a lack of public financing for scaling ECE interventions (see *Figure 12*, inputs/interventions and outputs columns).

### DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ3.3

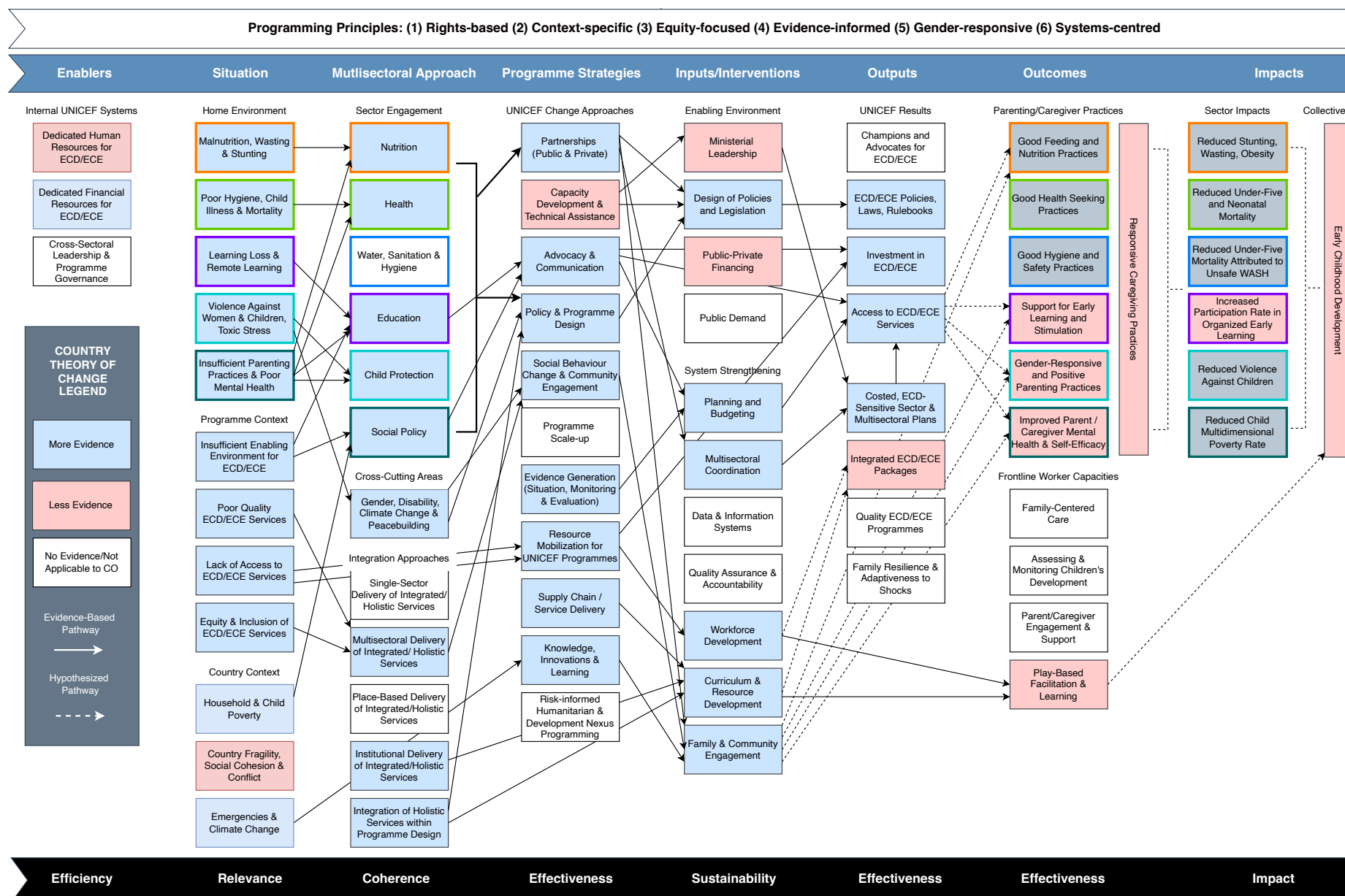
**UNICEF identified Goal Area or sector specific ToC that applied to children aged 0–8 years. While these ToCs were clear, they lacked integration.** The LCO CPD included Goal Area ToCs and their assumptions that have largely held true and the pathways to results were clear. However, what was unclear before this evaluation was how these ToC could converge to reflect the integrated ECD approach. Through the contribution analysis of this evaluation, it was possible to identify the ToC components and the pathways to change for the integrated ECD approach (see *Figure 12*). This included sector specific outcomes for parents/caregivers and child impacts, as well as collective outcomes for parents/caregivers and child impacts.

There was limited evidence on parent/caregiver outcomes in the documents reviewed and on front-line worker outcomes and child impacts (see Figure 12, outcomes column). However, documentation on the objectives of UNICEF-supported parenting programmes theoretically aim to improve parental support for learning, positive parenting practices, and parental mental health and self-efficacy. While the relationship between the integrated ECD approach and school readiness is clear within some national policies and plans, the implementation and results of these policies have yet to be fully realized in practice. A lack of recent data on children's participation in pre-primary and on their developmental status pose challenges to assessing UNICEF contribution on these impacts, although it is theoretically plausible (see Figure 12, impacts column).

**While the connection between the integrated ECD approach and school readiness is clearly outlined in several national policies and plans, the full implementation and impact of these policies have yet to be realized in practice.**

With UNICEF strong advocacy and technical support, significant progress has been made, including the development of the IECCD policy and plan, as well as complementary policies on nutrition, child protection, and inclusion of children with disabilities. Participation in the KIX programme has further accelerated efforts to scale up ECE for all children. At the subnational level, the implementation of the multi-sectoral approach is evident in initiatives such as child protection teams at the district level, ECD centres, and other integrated interventions, supported by inclusive national networking mechanisms chaired by the government. However, low public investment in ECD and ECE remains a major barrier to expanding access to quality services. Regional disparities in service availability and utilization, as well as slow progress in the inclusion of children with disabilities, further hinder equitable outcomes.



**Figure 12.** Retroactive theory of change on the integrated ECD approach in Lesotho

## Excluded child populations

**EQ3.4. Which UNICEF strategies have been relevant and effective in supporting child populations that are excluded from formal early learning programmes and/or pre-primary school in countries of different typologies?**

| 1=Weak                                                                                                                                                     | 2=Limited                                                                                                                                                                                           | 3=Emerging                                                                                                                                                                             | 4=Advanced                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UNICEF strategies are not well articulated or effective in engaging child populations that are excluded from early learning programmes and/or pre-primary. | UNICEF strategies are articulated to some extent, but evidence is lacking on their effectiveness in engaging child populations that are excluded from early learning programmes and/or pre-primary. | UNICEF strategies are articulated and there is some evidence on their effectiveness in engaging child populations that are excluded from early learning programmes and/or pre-primary. | UNICEF strategies well-articulated and there is substantial evidence on their effectiveness in engaging child populations that are excluded from early learning programmes and/or pre-primary. |

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR EQ3.4

UNICEF work is in the early stages of programme maturity, and as a result, the strategies for reaching excluded populations were related to the advocacy for a strengthened enabling environment. UNICEF advocacy for increased public financing for ECE has not yielded results on a large scale, and as a result, the most marginalized children are not covered by this service. Policies adopted for persons with disabilities will likely have a positive impact on the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-primary, but they are largely excluded at this time. UNICEF work in child protection offers a platform for scaling parenting programmes that include early learning components for children aged 0-2 years.

### Children with disabilities are largely excluded from early learning and pre-primary education.

The GoL has developed the inclusive education policy and the People with Disability Act, but they are not ECD-sensitive and implementation is at an early stage. The LCO has decided to allocate 1 per cent budget of every proposal as a standing disability contribution. More disaggregated data could inform planning and would allow progress to be measured. Some training of teachers on the inclusion of children with disability has started, which could be more systematic and expanded. Prioritizing the inclusion of children with disabilities is essential, and UNICEF has advocated for and collaborated with organizations such as LNFOD and others that are active at the subnational level to achieve this goal.

### Children aged 0-2 years have received less attention by UNICEF with regards to early learning opportunities.

More emphasis could be placed on parenting programmes, integrating them with existing ECD/ECE interventions and services to maximize impact. The implementation of multisectoral and integrated approaches, exemplified by initiatives like child protection teams, should be evaluated to inform programming and support more context-specific applications of the integrated approach based on local needs and resources.

### DETAILED FINDINGS FOR EQ3.4

**UNICEF strategies clearly focused on reaching the most marginalized children.** However, the government has not been able to fulfill its commitments regarding budget allocation for ECD and ECE and to scale up the universal provision of one year of free pre-primary education. For example, in remote areas, access is still challenging, as reported by FGD respondents, and for some categories like children that do not live with their parents or orphans. To increase the reach of ECE services for all children, UNICEF has provided technical assistance in innovative financing to address the public financing challenges. UNICEF has also provided capacity building and awareness raising activities, that target key government personnel and fostering stronger inter-ministerial collaboration.

# 5

## Challenges and lessons learned



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### Enabling environment

UNICEF supported increasing access to ECD and ECE during the evaluation period with multiple strategies and pursuing a cross-sectoral integrated approach, despite the limitation imposed by the COVID 19 crisis. However, there persists challenges in including marginalized groups of children, particularly multi-poor children, children with disabilities, those living in remote regions, OVC, and minorities. A major challenge is the lack of adequate and sustainable ECD and ECE financing. The GoL allocated a very low share of its budget to ECD, and partnership with the private sector and other actors is still restricted, thus hindering the possibility to scale-up access, in a sustainable manner. Internally, UNICEF budget allocated to ECD and ECE in Goal Areas 1 and 2 in Lesotho has dropped. This represents a main challenge to continue the initiated reform processes and maintain the leadership role and comparative advantage gained by UNICEF and widely acknowledged in the country. Within the LCO, limited accountability and M&E mechanisms, as well as dedicated resources for coordination and cross-sectoral cooperation constitute a challenge for the implementation of the integrated approach in UNICEF.

### System strengthening

UNICEF advocacy and campaigning efforts helped build awareness on the importance to invest in the early years. Challenges remain to create a critical mass and national technical experts to sustain and scale up efforts. Workforce development was a main strategy undertaken by UNICEF to improve quality of the services and capacities of the frontline workers to promote optimal holistic child development. Challenges remain to guarantee homogenous and adequate frontline workers' qualifications and remunerations, and to develop skills in providing cross sectoral services and coordination. A lesson learned that emerged is the effectiveness of the partnership with national actors, implementing partners, academia and research centres to contextualize interventions and coordinate multisectoral efforts. Partnerships with other international organizations and networks engaged in ECD (e.g. WHO, World Bank, etc.) helped increase leveraging power. National multisectoral networks and platforms play a significant role for coordination, when governments have a leading role and relevant actors from the civil society, implementing partners, donors, etc. actively participate.

## Data availability

UNICEF supported evidence generation with several actions, including the ECD sector review. However, data availability is still challenging, comparability between years is not always possible and data on the skills of caregivers and frontline workers and on child outcomes are limited. The integration of the ECD Index in all its parts in the existing national data collection systems has been challenging, as was the availability of baseline data for planning interventions. There are data gaps based on a child's age, for example after five years of age, which makes it challenging to monitor children's development and follow-up. In general, it is difficult to track ECD due to its multisectoral nature. Likewise, it is challenging to obtain robust data on ECD inputs and outcomes, disaggregated data (e.g. children with disabilities), and to have M&E data storage, as well as track children in the absence of fundamental data such as birth registration and early identification of disability.

# 6



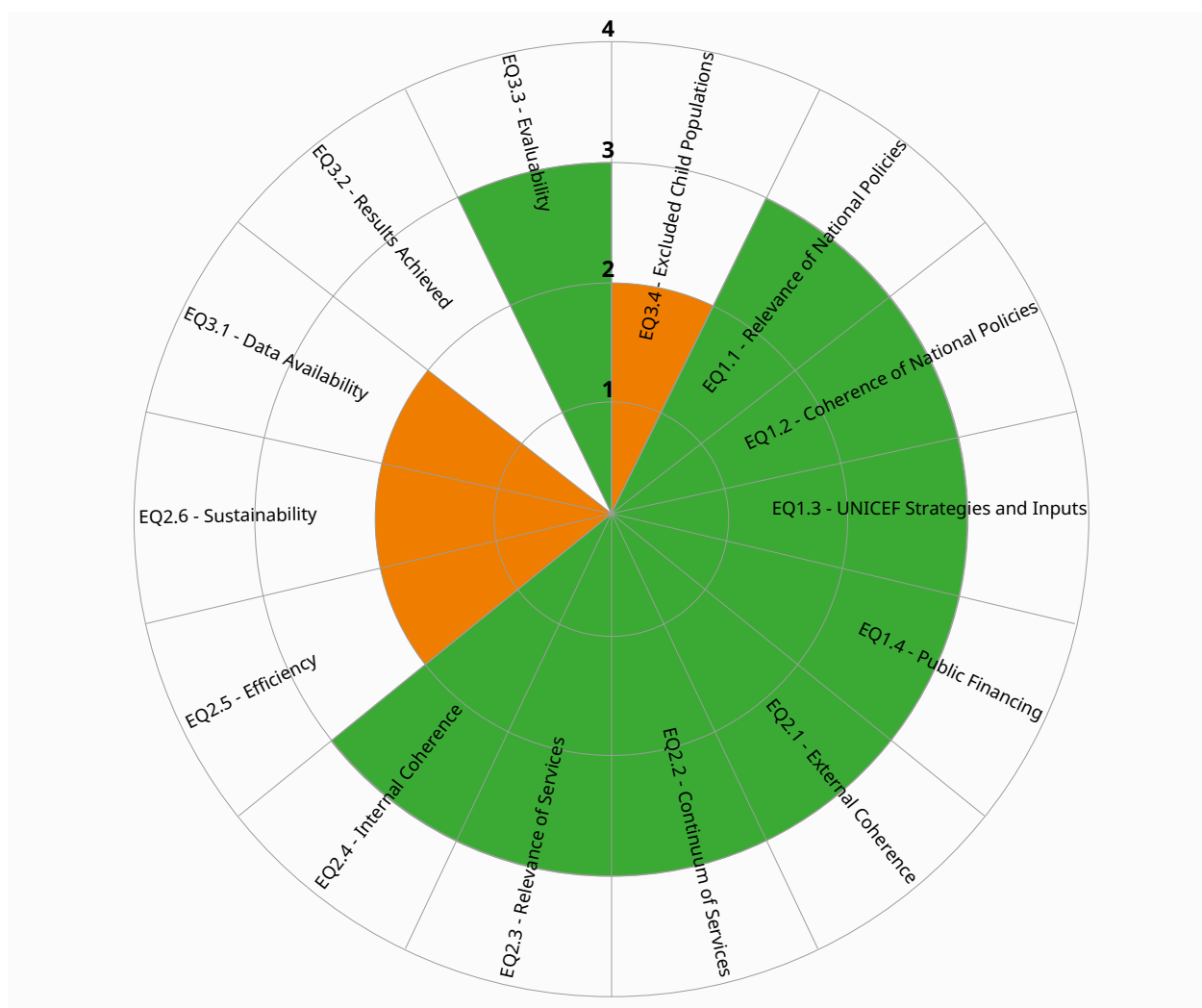
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## Evaluation conclusions and recommendations

### Synthesis of evaluation findings

The evaluation findings for UNICEF work on ECD and ECE from 2018 to 2023 in Lesotho should be interpreted with consideration of the organizational and international development context during this time period. UNICEF and the government faced unprecedented challenges during the global COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of which can be clearly seen in the evaluation findings. A summary of the evaluation rating scales is presented above (*see Figure 10*) and in the subsequent paragraphs. The ToC in [Annex 2](#) shows the identified pathways, particularly between implemented programme strategies, inputs, outputs, outcomes and sector and collective outcomes, based on the available data.

Overall, UNICEF work in Lesotho to improve ECD and ECE shows progress in policy development and multi-sectoral collaboration, but faces challenges in implementation due to limited resources, insufficient data collection, and uneven access for marginalized children, particularly those with disabilities. The EQ3.2 could not be rated due to the lack of relevant data. Significant policy alignment exists across sectors, yet inter-ministerial coordination and resource allocation remain weaknesses. While positive impacts are evident in expanding access to services for older preschoolers, services for younger children (aged 0-2 years) and parenting support, sustainability concerns exist due to heavy reliance on external funding and the need for increased government investment.

**Figure 13.** Summary of evaluation question rating scale results, Lesotho

**Rating scale:** 1 = weak; 2 = emerging; 3 = established; 4 = advanced

The **first objective** of this evaluation was to assess UNICEF work in support of national policy reform, financing strategies, and budgeting for strengthening ECD and the ECE sub-sector to expand access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children aged 0–8 years in Lesotho.

UNICEF support in Lesotho is well-aligned with national priorities for ECD and ECE by focusing on disadvantaged and marginalized children, including those with disabilities (see Figure 13, EQ1.1). The national ECD policy and plan align with the NCF, with UNICEF promoting a multisectoral approach that includes health, nutrition, education, child protection, and WASH (see Figure 13, EQ1.2). While additional national policies in nutrition, child protection, and

inclusive education were developed, they could be strengthened to better address the needs of children aged 0–8 years. Initiatives such as the BELDS programme have significantly improved ECE access, particularly for marginalized children. Despite policy commitments to equitable access, implementation challenges persist due to limited resources and insufficient political attention (see Figure 13, EQ1.4). UNICEF played a notable role in influencing the funding of ECD/ECE policy reforms and mobilizing resources from non-state actors (see Figure 13, EQ1.3). However, public budgeting remains insufficient across all sectors with the exception of social protection, leading to heavy reliance on external funding (see Figure 13, EQ1.4).

**The second objective was to examine the adequacy and sustainability of UNICEF integrated ECD approach and available capacities to support the adaption, acceleration, and scale-up efforts for providing early stimulation and learning support and services for children aged 0-8 years in Lesotho.**

UNICEF and the GoL share a common vision and understanding of the importance of investing in early years and adopting a multisectoral approach (see Figure 13, EQ2.1). However, staff turnover and capacity gaps persist at decentralized levels in implementing this integrated approach. UNICEF effectively contributed to the provision of various ECD services and parenting support programmes, particularly for children aged 3-5 years (see Figure 13, EQ2.2). However, national coverage for children aged 0-2 years and parenting support programmes remains limited due to inadequate resources. UNICEF has addressed the needs of young children and parents/caregivers, specifically those aged 3-8 years and children with disabilities, by improving ECE service quality and building frontline worker capacities (see Figure 13, EQ2.3). However, more recent data are needed to assess the progress made towards UNICEF target of all children being developmentally on track by 2025.

While UNICEF programme staff have a shared understanding of the integrated ECD approach and the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration, implementation is hindered by a lack of clear governance structures for planning, resourcing, monitoring, and evaluating the approach (see Figure 13, EQ2.4). UNICEF human and financial resources were insufficient to support the government's expanding ECD vision (see Figure 13, EQ2.5). Less than 15 per cent of Goal Area 1 and 2 resources were allocated to ECD and ECE programming from 2018-2023.

The sector-specific and multisectoral ECD policies and plans that will likely sustain UNICEF efforts in Lesotho (see Figure 13, EQ2.6). UNICEF has strengthened the enabling environment by strengthening ministerial leadership and capacity, guiding policy and legislation development, and facilitating the implementation of key strategies. However, continued advocacy is needed to encourage increased public investment in ECD and ECE and reduce reliance on external funding.

The third objective was to assess the efficacy of UNICEF support for the development of high quality integrated ECD and ECE programmes that promote holistic ECD and school readiness among caregivers and children aged 0-8 years in Lesotho.

There was insufficient data to assess progress on UNICEF objectives and contribution to outcomes related to the integrated ECD approach (see Figure 13, EQ3.1 and 3.2). At this stage of programme maturity, UNICEF contribution in Lesotho has been strengthening the enabling environment for integrated ECD policies and plans, as well as ECD-sensitive sector policies (see Figure 13, EQ3.2). More recent data is needed to understand UNICEF contribution to frontline worker capacities, parenting practices, and child impacts (see Figure 13, EQ3.1). Because UNICEF work is in its early stages, strategies for reaching excluded populations primarily involve advocating for a strengthened enabling environment (see Figure 13, EQ3.4). UNICEF advocacy for increased public ECE financing has not yielded significant results, excluding the most marginalized children from this service. Adopted policies for people with disabilities will likely positively impact the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-primary, and strengthening teacher capacities to work with children who have disabilities will likely improve the quality of services. However, children with disabilities are currently largely excluded currently early learning opportunities in Lesotho. UNICEF work in child protection offers a platform for scaling parenting programmes that include early learning components for children aged 0-2 years.

## Evaluation recommendations

Recommendations below offer guidance to address the challenges and limitations identified by the evaluation and provide a framework for enhancing the impact and sustainability of UNICEF ECD and ECE interventions in Lesotho. These recommendations were finalized in consultation with key stakeholders from the LCO.

### Recommendation 1

**Advocate for an increase in public financing for ECD, and review and sharpen the ECD policy.**

#### Sub-recommendations

- 1.1.** Advocate for increased public financing to especially address the needs of marginalized children (disabled, living in poor communities, orphans, not living with parents etc.) and to reduce donor dependency for sustainability.
- 1.2.** Strengthen policies to address specific needs of children aged 0-2 years and 3-5 years and develop a costed implementation plan.

 **Priority:** High

 **Timeframe:** Medium term

 **Responsible Units:** LCO senior management, specialists of ECD and related sectors, advocacy, partnerships, resource mobilization and social policy

 **Cost implications:** Human resources (staff time and capacity), financial resources (advocacy and policy review)

Public financing for ECD and ECE remains insufficient to scale up access, especially for the most marginalized children. Increased government investment would also enhance the sustainability of ECD and ECE programmes in Lesotho, now still highly dependent on external funds. UNICEF should continue advocating for increased government investment in ECD and ECE, reiterating the rationale for investing in ECD in terms of human capital development, especially for the marginalized children who can benefit more from quality ECD and ECE. The rationale to increase the current very low budget allocated to ECE includes the UNESCO recommendation to allocate 10 per cent of the education budget to pre-primary education.

While UNICEF has effectively mobilized resources from non-state actors, it is compelling to continue exploring alternative financing mechanisms. It is recommended that UNICEF continue providing technical assistance, assisting the government to find mid-term solutions and follow up its implementation. The use of the tools developed by the KIX project to scale-up ECE should be encouraged and supported.

Although several national policies and strategies for children's healthy development and well-being have been developed, they do not always adequately address the unique needs of younger children. UNICEF should assist the government to strengthen the policies to address the specific needs of children aged 0–5 years. For instance, the consequences of toxic stress in the early years and the importance of responsive caregiving for healthy and holistic child development could be better highlighted in all the relevant policies.

The current ECD policy needs to be revised and updated. UNICEF can provide technical assistance to the GoL in collaboration with other relevant national stakeholders to undertake the revision and fill the gaps. An updated policy and costed action plans are fundamental for a feasible implementation of integrated ECD programmes that can benefit all children in Lesotho.

## Recommendation 2

Strengthen external and internal capacity for the integrated ECD approach.

### Sub-recommendations

- 2.1.** Advocate/support to strengthen the capacity of the Early Childhood Care and Development Unit (ECCD) in the Ministry of Education and Training, especially to implement the integrated ECD approach.
- 2.2.** Scale-up and modify parenting programmes currently being implemented, to include early learning and responsive caregiving components for young children, especially for children aged 0–2 years.
- 2.3.** Establish a governance structure within UNICEF to enhance coordination and accountability with the implementation of integrated ECD approach.

 **Priority:** High

 **Timeframe:** Medium term

 **Responsible Units:** LCO senior management, and specialists of advocacy, partnerships ECD and education

 **Cost implications:** Human resources (staff time and capacity), financial resources (trainings, workshops and advocacy)

Strengthen the capacity of the ECCD unit in the Ministry of Education and Training, which is responsible for coordinating integrated ECD services to overcome the challenge of understaffing and lack of resources. UNICEF should advocate for adequate resources and provide capacity building to the ECCD Unit to enhance its ability to effectively implement the integrated ECD approach and collaborate with other ministries.

Invest in building the capacity and number of frontline workers to deliver integrated ECD services. While UNICEF has supported some capacity building efforts, there are still gaps in knowledge and skills among frontline workers (e.g. to strengthen inclusive education, playful teaching and learning, early detection of disabilities, etc.), particularly at the district level. Continued investment in training, including on integration mechanisms (e.g. exchange initiatives with other countries that have successfully implemented integrated ECD services at a decentralized level) would ensure the delivery of high-quality integrated ECD. Collaboration with local institutions such

as the College of Education is recommended to find tailored solutions and value national resources.

Currently, there is limited coverage of parenting programmes, especially for younger children. UNICEF should advocate for scaling up parenting programmes and provide technical assistance to design integrated parenting initiatives that include early learning and responsive caregiving components, especially for children aged 0–2 years. UNICEF dedicated [webpage](#) to parenting offers a range of resources that can be adapted to the Lesotho context. Care for Child Development and Caring for the Caregiver are two integrated training packages that can be adapted and implemented in Lesotho. Digital [parenting resources](#) offered by UNICEF that can meet Lesotho's needs are, among others: Internet of Good Things, the Bebbi App, and through the #EarlyMomentsMatter campaign assets. With support of UNICEF technical advisors and in collaboration with local stakeholders, these packages and resources can help fill the gaps in parenting programmes and significantly contribute to improved ECD and school readiness. Expanding and upgrading these programmes would contribute to a more comprehensive and continuous support system for families, while also adding an essential piece to promote healthy child development and helping children thrive.

Within the internal structure of UNICEF, develop clear governance structures and processes for the implementation of the integrated ECD approach. Currently there is a lack of clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of different staff in implementing this approach. Establishing clear governance structures would enhance coordination and accountability.

### Recommendation 3

Strengthen data availability and reach marginalized groups to uphold the LNOB 2030 agenda.

#### Sub-recommendations

- 3.1. Strengthen data collection and monitoring systems to track progress and to inform programme improvements. For example, ensuring the regular implementation of MICS.
- 3.2. Develop strategies to reach the most disadvantaged and excluded children, such as those with disabilities, living in remote areas, orphans and those not living with their parents.

 **Priority:** High

 **Timeframe:** Medium term

 **Responsible Units:** LCO senior management, and specialists of monitoring and planning, social policy, ECD and related sectors

 **Cost implications:** Human resources (staff time and capacity), financial resources (to strengthen data and monitoring systems)

GoL needs technical and financial support to improve data collection and monitoring systems to track progress and inform programmes. There is a lack of reliable and disaggregated data on key ECD indicators. Monitoring systems should include disaggregated data, particularly on disability inclusion. Addressing this gap would allow UNICEF and the GoL to better understand the impact of their interventions, use the data for advocacy purposes and make evidence-based decisions.

Ensure implementation of a new round of MICS to track progress on ECD interventions, including the disaggregation of data by disability and other variables concerning marginalized groups. UNICEF technical assistance could help the GoL overcome the difficulties in adopting the ECD Index. It would also be useful to strengthen administrative data systems (e.g. EMIS) to provide more frequent tracking of disability inclusion in ECD/ECE

The GoL needs to be supported and guided to develop strategies to reach the most excluded children, such as those with disabilities, children living in remote areas and children who do not live with their parents. These children face significant barriers to accessing ECD services. The technical assistance could encompass the analysis of the problems and design of targeted interventions based on the specific needs and resources, and exploring collaboration with relevant non-state actors.

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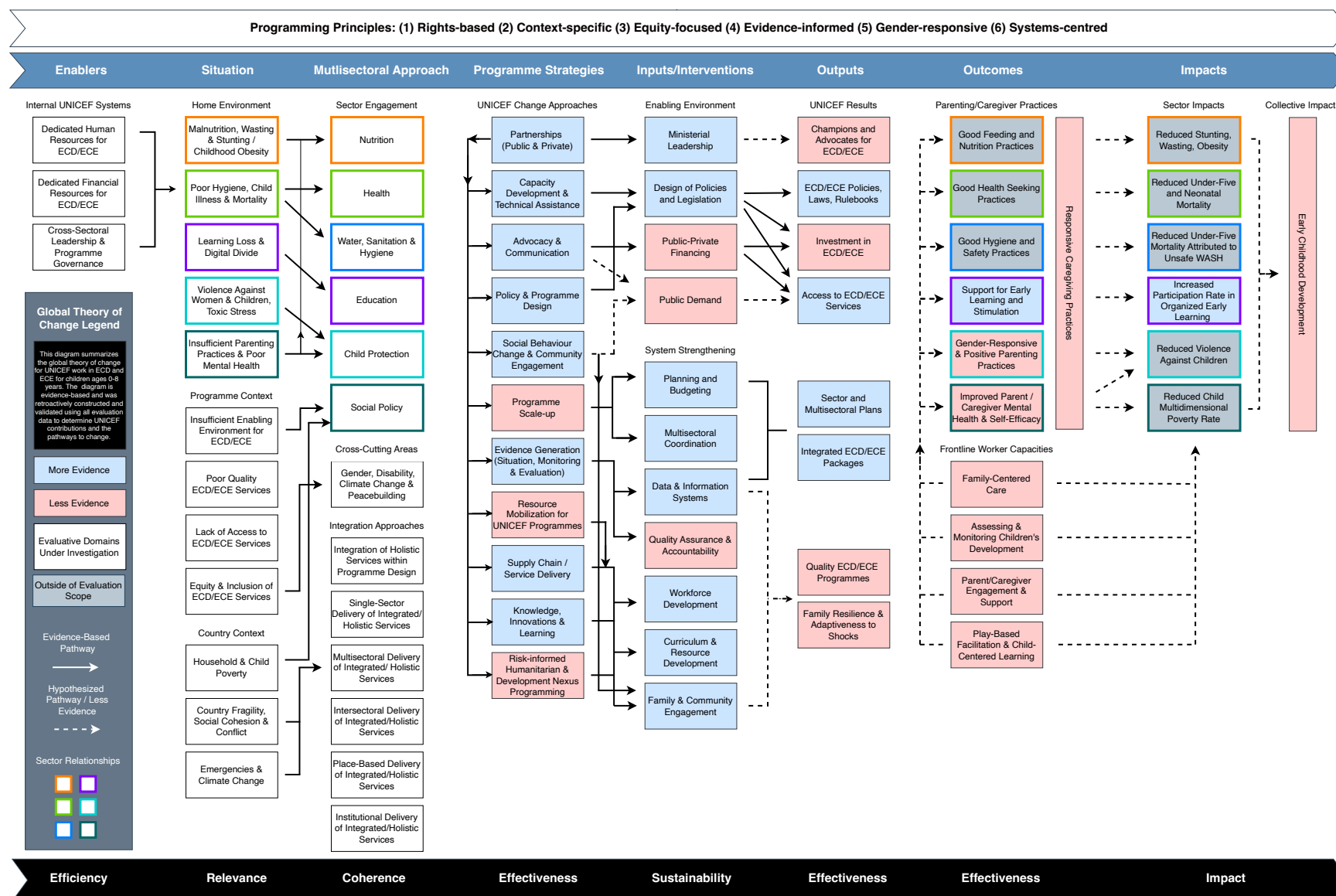
## Annexes

### Annex 1: Terms of reference

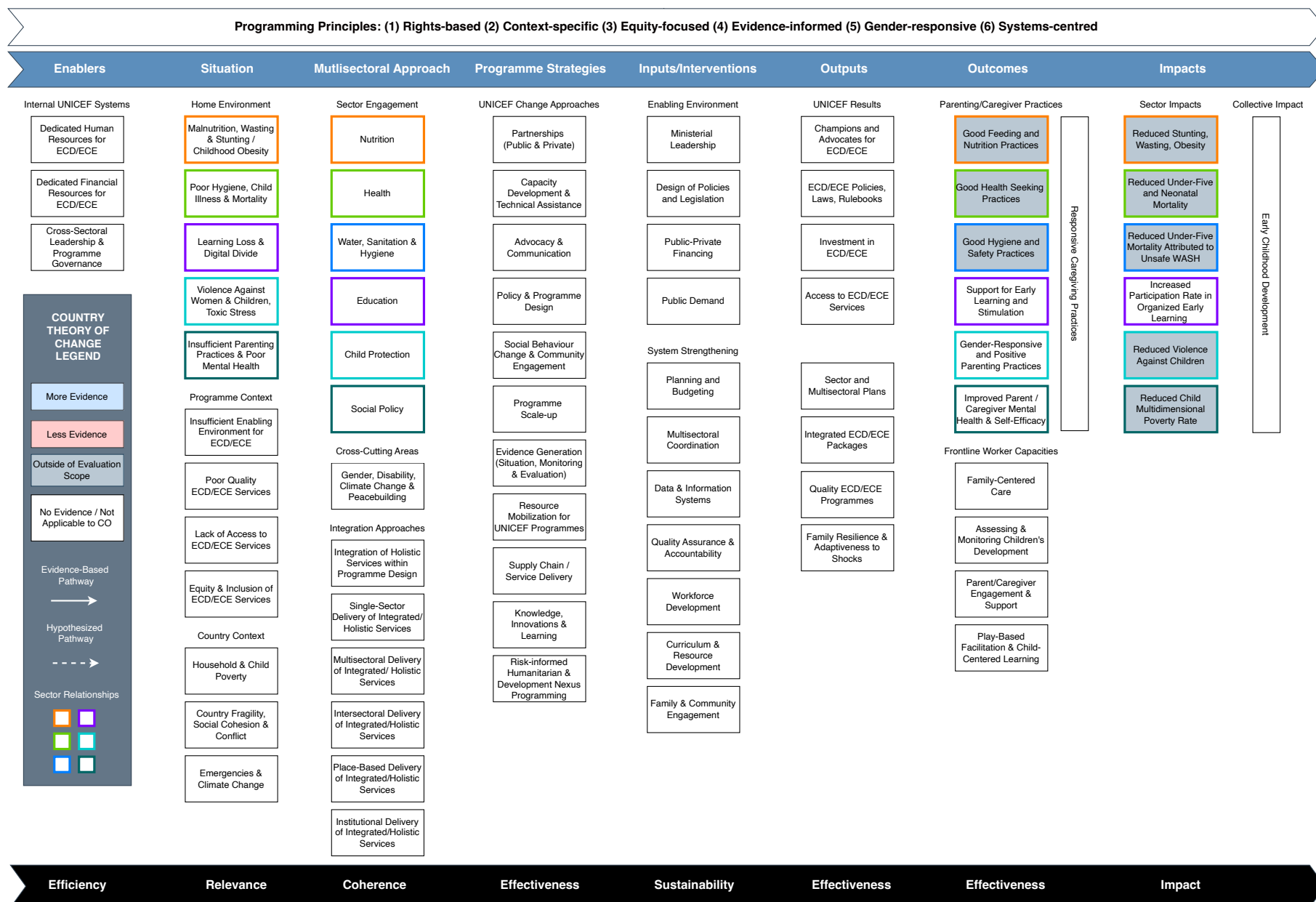
See Annex 1 in [Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education \(2018-2023\) - Global Report – Part II Annexes](#). Evaluation Office, United Nations Children's Fund, March 2025.

## Annex 2: UNICEF ECD-ECE ToC for children aged 0-8 years

## Global ECD-ECE evaluation ToC for children aged 0-8 years (2018-2023)

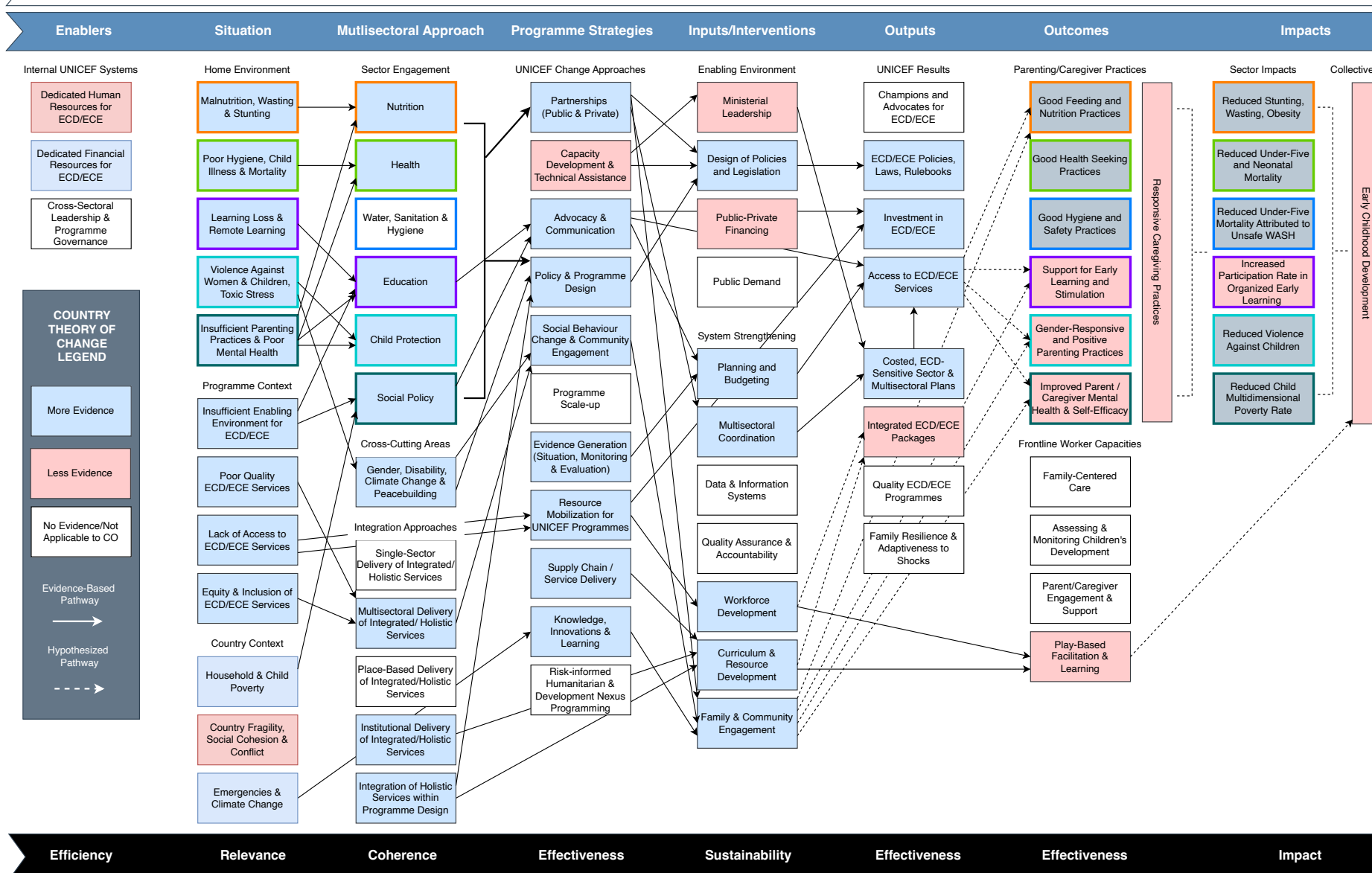


## ECD-ECE evaluation ToC template for country office desk review contribution analysis



## Lesotho ECD-ECE evaluation ToC for children aged 0-8 years (2018-2023)

Programming Principles: (1) Rights-based (2) Context-specific (3) Equity-focused (4) Evidence-informed (5) Gender-responsive (6) Systems-centred



## ECD-ECE theory of change definitions - global

See Annex 2 in [Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education \(2018-2023\) - Global Report – Part II Annexes](#). Evaluation Office, United Nations Children's Fund, March 2025.

## Annex 3: Evaluation framework - global

See Annex 3 in [Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education \(2018-2023\) - Global Report – Part II Annexes](#). Evaluation Office, United Nations Children's Fund, March 2025.

## Annex 4: Evaluation indicator scales - global

See Annex 4 in [Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education \(2018-2023\) - Global Report – Part II Annexes](#). Evaluation Office, United Nations Children's Fund, March 2025.

## Annex 5: Primary data collection protocols - global

See Annex 6 in [Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education \(2018-2023\) - Global Report – Part II Annexes](#). Evaluation Office, United Nations Children's Fund, March 2025.

## Annex 6: Secondary data analysis - global

See Annex 7 in [Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education \(2018-2023\) - Global Report – Part II Annexes](#). Evaluation Office, United Nations Children's Fund, March 2025.

## Annex 7: Ethical review process-global

See Annex 8 in [Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education \(2018-2023\) - Global Report – Part II Annexes](#). Evaluation Office, United Nations Children's Fund, March 2025.

## Annex 8: Qualitative data analysis coding manual - global

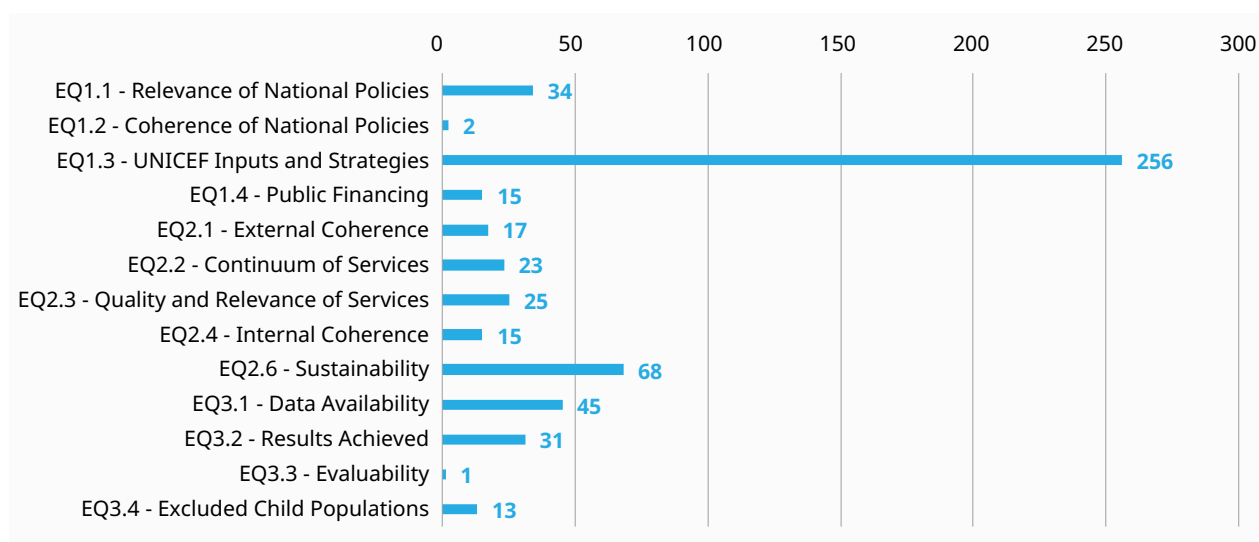
See Annex 9 in [Evaluation of UNICEF work in early childhood development and early childhood education \(2018-2023\) - Global Report – Part II Annexes](#). Evaluation Office, United Nations Children's Fund, March 2025.

## Annex 9: Lesotho data tables and figures

In Lesotho, a sample of frontline workers and parents participated in the evaluation from two regions: Leribe and Botha-Bothe. A total of 92 participants were engaged in the evaluation across seven sessions. Participants included 29 frontline workers (all preschool teachers) and 63 parents who represented children aged 0-8 years, including children with disabilities (see Table 8). Both male and female participants were invited to participate, but the sample was majority female (99 per cent).

**Table 8.** Description of focus group participants in Lesotho

| Session number | Stakeholder group | Total N | Total M | Total F  | Ages of children | Session location | Other demographic information collected |
|----------------|-------------------|---------|---------|----------|------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| 1              | Parents           | 20      | 0       | 20       | 0 to 8 years     | Leribe           | Includes children with disabilities     |
| 2              | Frontline Workers | 6       | 0       | 6        | 0 to 5 years     | Leribe           | Preschool teachers                      |
| 3              | Frontline Workers | 15      | 1       | 14       | 0 to 6 years     | Leribe           | Preschool teachers                      |
| 4              | Parents           | 12      | 0       | 12       | 0 to 7 years     | Leribe           |                                         |
| 5              | Parents           | 14      | 0       | 14       | 0 to 6 years     | Botha Bothe      |                                         |
| 6              | Parents           | 17      | 0       | 17       | 0 to 6 years     | Botha Bothe      |                                         |
| 7              | Frontline workers | 8       | 0       | 8        | 2 to 5 years     | Botha Bothe      | Preschool teachers                      |
| 7              |                   | 92      | 1       | 91 (99%) | 0 to 8 years     |                  |                                         |

**Figure 14.** Total number of code applications, by evaluation sub-question, Lesotho**Table 9.** Total overall and unique code applications, by evaluation question

| Overall N | Unique N Applications | Code Title                                       | Code Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 308       | 1                     | EQ1 - Enabling Environment                       | EQ1. To what extent was UNICEF support for policy reforms, public budgeting, and financing for ECD and the ECE sub - sector successful in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children of 0 - 8 years old?          |
|           | 34                    | EQ1.1 – Relevance of National Policies           | 1.1. To what extent do UNICEF - supported policy and practice align with national goals for ECD and ECE and the organizational commitment to progressively reach the poorest and most marginalized children, including children with disabilities? |
|           |                       | Access                                           | The national ECD/ECD development plans, strategies and policies mention increasing or scaling access to stimulation and learning in the early years as a goal                                                                                      |
|           | 5                     | Build to Last Framework/ Universal Pre - Primary | Reference is made to universal pre -primary in national ECD/ECE development plans, strategies and policies                                                                                                                                         |
|           |                       | Equity                                           | The national ECD/ECE development plans, strategies and policies integrate and address issues of equity, gender and inclusion                                                                                                                       |
|           | 20                    | Multisectoral / Integrated ECD Approach          | The multisectoral approach is referenced in national ECD/ECE development plans, strategies and policies                                                                                                                                            |
|           | 4                     | Nurturing Care Framework / Holistic ECD          | Reference is made to Nurturing Care Framework or holistic early childhood development in national ECD/ ECE development plans, strategies and policies                                                                                              |
|           | 5                     | Parenting/Caregivers                             | The national ECD/ECE development plans, strategies and policies reference the role of parents/caregivers in stimulation and learning in the early years                                                                                            |

| Overall N | Unique N Applications | Code Title                                   | Code Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2         |                       | EQ1.2 – Coherence of National Policies       | 1.2. To what extent is there policy coherence in the sectors that are responsible for providing ECD and ECE services?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|           |                       | Cross Sectoral Mechanisms                    | Cross sectoral communication, coordination and collaboration mechanisms for ECD and ECE services are described in policies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|           |                       | Focus Populations                            | The target populations for ECD and ECE (caregivers and children) are clearly described in the policies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|           |                       | Goals and Objectives                         | The explicit goals and objectives for ECD and ECE are described in the policies and are complementary (not contradictory)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|           |                       | Sector Engagement                            | The sectors involved in providing ECD and ECE services are explicitly mentioned in the policies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|           |                       | Sector Roles                                 | Sector roles and responsibilities in providing ECD and ECE services are described in the policies and are complementary                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 42        |                       | EQ1.3 - UNICEF Inputs (enabling environment) | 1.3. Which UNICEF - supported strategies (e.g., advocacy and communication, evidence generation, social behaviour change and community engagement, etc.) and inputs/interventions (e.g., policies, regulatory frameworks, tools, processes and/or other practices) were effective in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years? |
| 29        |                       | Financing                                    | UNICEF - supported actions to ensure government prioritize ECE and ECE through public financing                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 7         |                       | Ministerial Leadership                       | UNICEF - supported actions to build the capacity and leadership of relevant ministries, providers and stakeholders as needed                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 3         |                       | Policies and Legislation                     | UNICEF - supported actions to promote ECD/ECE policies and/or legislation with the ministry of education (or other lead ministries)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 3         |                       | Public Demand                                | UNICEF - supported actions to ensure ECD and pre - primary education are considered a public good, and/or to promote public demand for these services                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 88        |                       | EQ1.3 - UNICEF Inputs (systems)              | 1.3. Which UNICEF - supported strategies (e.g., advocacy and communication, evidence generation, social behaviour change and community engagement, etc.) and inputs/interventions (e.g., policies, regulatory frameworks, tools, processes and/or other practices) were effective in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years? |
| 21        |                       | Coordination Mechanisms                      | UNICEF - supported actions to establish or participate in mechanisms for coordination within and across sectors to integrate ECD and ECE services                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

| Overall N | Unique N Applications | Code Title                                  | Code Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|           | 15                    | Curriculum Development                      | UNICEF - supported action to strengthen national curricula that establish the scope, goals, teaching and learning principles, methods, and content priorities of the ECD and ECE                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|           | 8                     | Data and Information Systems                | UNICEF - supported actions to strengthen government capacity to collect routine data on the situation of children, and to ensure appropriate systems are in place for managing and utilizing this evidence for programming                                                                                                                                              |
|           | 6                     | Family and Community Engagement             | UNICEF - supported actions to build government capacity for family and community engagement in supporting children's learning and development across early learning settings                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|           | 3                     | Planning and Budgeting                      | UNICEF - supported actions to develop/revise strong and responsive sector and/or multisectoral plans, across levels of government, for equitable provision of quality ECD services and pre - primary education                                                                                                                                                          |
|           | 4                     | Quality Assurance                           | UNICEF - supported actions to build government capacity for research, monitoring and evaluation of ECD and ECE centres/preschools, services, frontline workers, children's learning, caregiving practices, etc.                                                                                                                                                         |
|           | 31                    | Workforce Development                       | UNICEF - supported actions to build government capacity for the recruitment, training/development, and retention of a sufficient number of ECD frontline workers, and ECE/pre - primary teachers to strengthen pedagogical quality                                                                                                                                      |
|           | 126                   | EQ1.3 - UNICEF Strategies                   | 1.3. Which UNICEF - supported strategies (e.g., advocacy and communication, evidence generation, social behaviour change and community engagement, etc.) and inputs/interventions (e.g., policies, regulatory frameworks, tools, processes and/or other practices) were effective in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years? |
|           | 34                    | Advocacy and Communication                  | UNICEF - led/supported actions to advocate for ECD and ECE, such as through communication campaigns, high - level meetings, UNICEF visibility and/or leadership in forums, etc.                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|           | 24                    | Capacity Development / Technical Assistance | UNICEF - led/supported actions to build the capacity of governments and/or implementing partners in ECD/ ECE, including providing technical assistance                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|           | 7                     | Evidence Generation                         | UNICEF - led/supported research/studies, monitoring of the situation of children, and evaluations of ECD and ECE                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|           | 6                     | Innovations, Knowledge Management           | UNICEF - led/supported actions to facilitate innovation and knowledge management for ECD and ECE (e.g., digital learning, ECD country profiles, etc.)                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|           | 6                     | Policy and Programme Design                 | UNICEF - led/supported actions to strengthen the design of integrated ECD and ECE policies and programmes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

| Overall N | Unique N Applications | Code Title                                       | Code Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|           | 3                     | Programme Scale - Up                             | UNICEF - led/supported actions to scale - up integrated ECD/ECE programmes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|           | 12                    | Resource Mobilization                            | UNICEF - led/supported actions to mobilize organizational resources for ECD/ECE programming, including in emergencies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|           | 12                    | Social Behaviour Change and Community Engagement | UNICEF - led/supported actions to change harmful social norms and/or encourage positive nurturing care practices and school readiness through community engagement for ECD/ECE                                                                                                                                                                               |
|           | 19                    | Supply Chain/ Service Delivery                   | UNICEF - led/supported actions to provide direct services for ECD/ECE (e.g., ECD Kits for emergencies, school in a box, etc.)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|           | 3                     | System Strengthening                             | UNICEF - led/supported actions to strengthen the systems for integrated ECE and ECD services                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|           | 15                    | EQ1.4 - Public Financing                         | 1.4. To what extent was UNICEF support for policy reforms, public budgeting, and financing for ECD and the ECE sub - sector successful in expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning for children from 0 - 8 years old?<br><br>Use this code if you think the text applies to public financing, but you cannot link to the level 3 codes |
|           | 5                     | Budget Allocation                                | Budget allocated to ECD or ECE in the Education budget, and other relevant budgets. Share of public financing of the budget for ECE.                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|           | 1                     | Budget Increase                                  | Evidence of increase in budget allocation for ECD or ECE (all types of ECE interventions).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|           | 2                     | Budget Review                                    | Evidence of budget expenditure reviews, cost effectiveness against achieved outcomes, and/or involving stakeholders and the public in budgeting for accountability                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|           |                       | Budget Utilization                               | Evidence of ECD ECE budget spending                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 242       | 1                     | EQ2 - System Strengthening                       | EQ2. To what extent has UNICEF leveraged the integrated ECD approach to support countries in building capacities and systems to adapt, accelerate, and scale - up efforts to strengthen coordination across sectors in support of holistic development of young children from 0 - 8 years old?                                                               |
|           | 17                    | EQ2.1 – External Coherence                       | 2.1. To what extent is there a shared vision and conceptual understanding between UNICEF and government counterparts on (i) determinants of school readiness and learning in the early years (0 - 8 years); and (ii) the efficacy of the integrated /multi - sectoral ECD approach in different country contexts?                                            |
|           | 1                     | Care and Protection                              | UNICEF and government counterparts understand the need for responsive caregiving and protection in the early years as a basis of psychosocial development                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

| Overall N | Unique N Applications | Code Title                          | Code Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|           |                       | Early Learning                      | UNICEF and government counterparts understand the need for early learning opportunities as a basis for cognitive development                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 2         |                       | Nutrition and Stimulation           | UNICEF and government counterparts understand the need for nutrition and stimulation in the early years as a basis of healthy development                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 49        |                       | EQ2.2 – Continuum of Services       | 2.2. To what extent has the integrated /multi - sectoral ECD approach been effective in promoting a continuum of learning opportunities in the early years and school readiness?                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 7         |                       | Access to ECD/ECE                   | Evidence of ECD and ECE stimulation and learning opportunities, programmes and services for children aged 0 – 8 years                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 16        |                       | Decentralized Policy Implementation | Evidence of policy implementation at the decentralized level to scale access and ensure a continuum of services for children aged 0-8 years across the sectors                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|           |                       | EQ2.3 - Dual - Generation Approach  | 2.3. To what extent is UNICEF work on integrated /multi - sectoral ECD and school readiness meeting the needs of children and caregivers?                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 1         |                       | Parent - School Relationships       | Evidence of UNICEF - supported approaches to parent - teacher - school relationships, such as through parent - teacher associations for preschools, parent management committees for preschools, parents as volunteers/caregivers in ECD/ECE centres, parent events, curriculum or training for teachers on parent engagement, etc.                      |
| 24        |                       | Parenting Programmes                | Evidence of UNICEF - supported holistic parenting programmes focused on stimulation and early learning, parenting education (e.g., Care for Child Development, School Readiness parenting programmes)                                                                                                                                                    |
| 15        |                       | EQ2.4 – Internal Coherence          | 2.4. To what extent does UNICEF have a shared vision and understanding of the integrated /multi - sectoral ECD approach, coordination mechanisms and capacities across sectors to increase access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years and to support the holistic development of young children and their school readiness? |
| 5         |                       | Entry Points                        | The entry points for integrating ECD and ECE in UNICEF programming are described in corporate documents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 4         |                       | Internal Coordination Mechanisms    | Internal coordination and planning mechanisms to facilitate joint planning and monitoring of the integrated ECD approach are provided in corporate documents                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|           |                       | Roles and Responsibilities          | The roles and responsibilities of UNICEF sections are described in the documents as it relates to the integrated ECD approach                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

| Overall N | Unique N Applications | Code Title                      | Code Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2         |                       | Shared Definitions and Concepts | Stakeholder definitions of key concepts (integrated ECD, nutrition and stimulation, care and protection, early learning, early childhood development)                                                                                                                                |
|           |                       | Shared Measurement Framework    | The theory of change and measurement framework of the integrated ECD approach are provided in corporate documents                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 92        |                       | EQ2.5 - Efficiency              | 2.5. Are UNICEF resources (financial and human) and partnership arrangements well positioned to accelerate and scale - up efforts to strengthen integrated ECD programmes and the ECE subsector? Are the partnership arrangements strategic and efficient?                           |
| 26        |                       | Comparative Advantage           | Description of UNICEF comparative advantage in the ECD and ECE spaces in relation to other partners, including leadership, technical expertise, visibility, investments in the country                                                                                               |
| 65        |                       | Partnerships                    | Description of partners and partnership arrangements for UNICEF work on ECD and ECE                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|           |                       | Shared Resources                | Evidence of UNICEF financial and human resource investments in the integrated ECD approach across the sectors, including the 10% share for ECE                                                                                                                                       |
| 68        |                       | EQ2.6 - Sustainability          | 2.6. To what extent did UNICEF support or implement measures to enhance the sustainability and utility of the key strategies, programmes, and/or interventions aimed at expanding access to opportunities for stimulation and learning in the early years?                           |
| 1         |                       | Community Resilience            | Evidence of UNICEF efforts to support the sustainability of its ECD and ECE programming work when emergencies arise, such as through the civic participation, empowerment and resiliency of families and communities (the Social Behaviour Change and Community Engagement strategy) |
| 2         |                       | ECD Policy                      | Evidence of an ECD policy and its stage of implementation                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 1         |                       | ECE Policy                      | Evidence of an ECE policy and its stage of implementation                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|           |                       | Emergency Preparedness Plan     | Evidence of an emergency preparedness plan that includes ECD and ECE response and programming approaches                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 18        |                       | Integrated Plans                | Evidence of integration between ECE and ECD frameworks, plans and programme strategies                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 40        |                       | Sector/Multisectoral Plans etc. | Evidence of sector and multisectoral plans, strategies, frameworks                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

| Overall N | Unique N Applications | Code Title                      | Code Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 92        | 2                     | EQ3 – Programme Results         | EQ3. To what extent has the integrated ECD approach been successful in promoting early childhood development and school readiness among caregivers and children from 0 - 8 years old?                                                                                                                                          |
|           | 45                    | EQ3.1 - Data Availability       | 3.1. To what extent do countries collect and utilize reliable and disaggregated data on caregiver practices, children's developmental status and on children's participation and learning in early childhood education for programme planning and improvement?                                                                 |
|           | 1                     | Caregiver Data                  | Data on caregiver knowledge, attitudes and practices for nurturing care, early stimulation and learning are available; evidence of UNICEF actions to gather this data if not available, or to integrate caregiver data collection into existing government data collection platforms (i.e., census, health surveillance, etc.) |
|           |                       | Data Collection Manuals         | UNICEF manuals or guidance for national government to collect data on the ECD Index, caregiver KAP surveys, and school readiness                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|           | 6                     | Data Disaggregation             | Evidence that data for ECD and ECE is disaggregated for all relevant populations                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|           | 6                     | Data Utility                    | Cases in which a clear link between data on ECE/ECD and use for decision making and planning, and/or for policy and/or programme improvement                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|           | 1                     | ECD Index                       | Data on children's developmental status is available; evidence of UNICEF actions to gather this data if not available, or to integrate the ECD Index into existing government data collection platforms (i.e., census, health surveillance, etc.)                                                                              |
|           | 2                     | Interoperable Data Systems      | Evidence that there is interoperability between national ECE and ECD data collection and monitoring systems                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|           | 2                     | School Readiness Data           | Data on school readiness are available; evidence of UNICEF actions to gather this data if not available, or to integrate data collection on school readiness into existing government data collection platforms (i.e., EMIS, etc.)                                                                                             |
|           | 31                    | EQ3.2 – Results Achieved        | 3.2. To what extent has UNICEF work met ECD and ECE objectives and targets for caregivers and young children as it relates to stimulation and learning in the early years?<br><br>Evidence of UNICEF contribution or achievements for ECD and ECE (inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts in the theory of change)              |
|           | 2                     | Accountability to Rights Holder | Evidence of feedback mechanisms for UNICEF - supported ECD/ECE interventions with parents, caregivers and community members (including participation of children aged 6 - 8 years and adolescent parents)                                                                                                                      |

| Overall N | Unique N Applications | Code Title                                            | Code Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|           |                       | Community Feedback                                    | Studies or evaluations that provide information on community views of UNICEF - supported ECD/ECE interventions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 6         |                       | Programme Results (see codes below)                   | Evidence of UNICEF contribution or achievements for ECD and ECE (inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts in the theory of change)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 2         |                       | Access to Parenting Programmes                        | Evidence that UNICEF work has contributed to increased access to parenting programmes; and/or frontline worker/parent/caregiver reports on access to parenting programmes: (1) Parents have access to programs and services that support the development of their children; and (2) I have access to programs and services that support the development of my children |
| 3         |                       | Access to Play and Early Learning Materials           | Evidence that UNICEF work has contributed to increased access to play and early learning materials; and/or frontline worker/parent/caregiver reports on access to play and early learning materials: (1) I have playthings at my school/centre for children to learn; and (2) I have playthings at home for my children to learn                                       |
| 1         |                       | Early Learning Opportunities                          | Evidence that UNICEF work has contributed to early learning opportunities; and/or frontline worker/parent/caregiver reports on access to early learning opportunities                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 5         |                       | Early Stimulation and Responsive Caregiving Practices | Evidence that UNICEF has contributed to frontline worker/parent/caregiver capacities on early stimulation and responsive caregiving practices, such as their reports to focus group sessions on: (1) I sing or play with my students every day to help them learn; and (2) I sing or play with my children every day to help them learn                                |
| 5         |                       | Programme Effectiveness                               | Evidence that UNICEF parenting and school readiness programmes are effective; and/or frontline worker/parent/caregiver reports on programme effectiveness for UNICEF supported interventions: (1) My students benefit from UNICEF support; and (2) My children benefit from UNICEF support                                                                             |
| 7         |                       | School Readiness                                      | Evidence that UNICEF work has contributed to school readiness; and/or frontline worker/parent/caregiver reports on school readiness: (1) Children learn the things they need to be ready for school; (2) My children learn the things they need to be ready for school                                                                                                 |
| 1         |                       | EQ3.3 - Evaluability                                  | 3.3. To what extent has the theory of change for UNICEF work in ECD and ECE held true in terms of the logic and pathways to results for children and caregivers? What are the major contributions by UNICEF in the achievement of results?                                                                                                                             |
|           |                       | Results Chain Logic                                   | Evidence of the results chain logic (i.e., text describing a clear link between UNICEF strategies and outputs, between outputs and outcomes, and between outcomes and impacts)                                                                                                                                                                                         |

| Overall N       | Unique N Applications | Code Title                          | Code Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1               |                       | UNICEF Contribution                 | Clear evidence of UNICEF contribution to results for children and caregivers                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 13              |                       | EQ3.4 – Excluded Child Populations  | 3.4. Which UNICEF strategies have been relevant and effective in supporting child populations that are excluded from formal early learning programmes and/or pre - primary school in countries of different typologies?                          |
|                 |                       | Alternative Education               | UNICEF - supported catch up programmes and/or other alternative pathways to formal pre - primary school, such as non - formal education opportunities (not centre - based), mobile creche/ECD centres, etc.                                      |
|                 |                       | Cash Transfers                      | UNICEF - supported cash transfers in emergencies and/ or poor resource contexts to support young children s access to early learning and pre - primary                                                                                           |
| 2               |                       | Education in Emergencies            | Safe schools in conflict affected contexts; the provision of ECD services (e.g., ECD Kits) for children; parenting and child support focused on mental health services; integrating with other services such as food                             |
| 10              |                       | Inclusive Education                 | UNICEF - supported actions to promote inclusive education in early learning and/or pre - primary school, and/or to ensure children with disabilities have access to these opportunities, including pedagogical approaches and teaching practices |
| Tags            |                       |                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 93              |                       | Challenges                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 33              |                       | Lessons Learned                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Child Age Group |                       |                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 15              |                       | 0 -2                                | First 1,000 days                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 28              |                       | 3-5                                 | preschool/pre - primary years                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 9               |                       | 6-8                                 | primary school                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 12              |                       | Emergency/ Humanitarian situation   | Apply this code if the text describes an ECD/ECE intervention (policy, systems, programmes) being supported by UNICEF in humanitarian or emergency situations.                                                                                   |
| 12              |                       | Marginalized Groups                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                 |                       | Boys                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                 |                       | Children in humanitarian situations |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 3               |                       | Children living in poverty          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

| Overall N | Unique N Applications | Code Title                                     | Code Description |
|-----------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------------|
|           | 43                    | Children with disabilities                     |                  |
|           |                       | Girls                                          |                  |
|           | 4                     | Marginalized cultural groups/ethnic minorities |                  |
|           | 1                     | Migrant/refugee children                       |                  |
|           | 1                     | Teen fathers                                   |                  |
|           | 10                    | Teen mothers                                   |                  |
|           |                       | Working children                               |                  |
|           |                       | Sectors                                        |                  |
|           | 20                    | child protection                               |                  |
|           | 47                    | education                                      |                  |
|           | 24                    | health                                         |                  |
|           | 24                    | nutrition                                      |                  |
|           | 17                    | social policy                                  |                  |
|           | 11                    | water and sanitation                           |                  |



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