



TOWARDS IMPROVED EMERGENCY RESPONSES

Synthesis of UNICEF Evaluations
of Humanitarian Action 2010 – 2016

Towards Improved Emergency Responses – Synthesis of UNICEF Evaluations of Humanitarian Action 2010 – 2016

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Preface

Around the world, more than half a billion children live in countries affected by conflict and disasters. In too many parts of the world, children and young people have been caught up in emergencies that have put their lives and well-being at risk and, all too often, have taken those young lives. Children and their families have been swept from their homes, exposed to hunger and disease and left without the facilities and infrastructure needed to support their health and decent conditions of life. Conflicts have wiped away the gains made through decades of development effort and blocked the path towards future prosperity for millions of children, young people and their communities.

UNICEF plays a major role in the efforts of the international community to address humanitarian emergencies, working at all levels and with a wide range of partners. UNICEF expenditure on humanitarian assistance now exceeds \$3 billion, constituting nearly half of the organization's total expenditure. In recent years, UNICEF has worked hard to improve the support and services it provides to the children and communities affected by emergencies. These efforts intensified in 2010, when two major humanitarian disasters occurred: first, the extensive flooding in Pakistan, followed by the devastating earthquake in Haiti. These huge disasters served as a wake-up call for UNICEF, the United Nations and the wider humanitarian community, and prompted a major reconsideration of the approach to large-scale humanitarian relief. This led to the formulation of the global Transformative Agenda, which aims to strengthen leadership, accountability and coordination. Meanwhile, UNICEF took forward internal efforts to strengthen its capacity and approach through an initiative for Strengthening Humanitarian Action.

Evaluations have contributed to these efforts to improve and strengthen the response to emergencies. Evaluations have helped UNICEF to learn lessons and improve its capacity to respond quickly and effectively to emergencies. The present report presents a synthesis of findings from 30 UNICEF evaluations, drawing out lessons and conclusions intended to support further improvements in the organization's approach and performance at a time when the world faces immense humanitarian challenges.

The report tells an encouraging story of progress and improvement. UNICEF is shown to have learned from experience and adapted its approach to become faster and more effective, while contributing to the wider reforms of the humanitarian system mentioned above. Important results have been achieved for children through work in key sectors and across many locations. However, several areas of weakness remain and the report draws conclusions and makes recommendations on key issues found to require attention.

This Synthesis Report draws on evaluations that were produced by UNICEF from 2010 to 2016. It begins with a description of UNICEF's arrangements for humanitarian action, and their evolution since 2010. It then describes how evaluations have assessed humanitarian action, and presents the main findings from the synthesis work, including strengths and weaknesses, as well as factors that have supported or constrained performance. Finally, the report provides conclusions and lessons drawn from the evidence, followed by recommendations for the future. It follows up a similar synthesis exercise undertaken in 2013, which covered the period from 2008 to 2012, and it documents progress achieved since then.¹

This document is a summary report based on a more expansive Synthesis Report. It aims to present the key findings and conclusions from the main Synthesis Report in a concise and accessible format. Readers interested in additional details are invited to refer to the main report, available on the UNICEF evaluation website. The main report also presents, in an annex, a synthesis of the large body of relevant reviews and other material generated over the same period. While these were not undertaken as formal evaluations, these programme reviews, lessons learned exercises and after-action reviews provide valuable insights and lessons.

On behalf of the Evaluation Office, I would like to thank Dr. Julia Betts and Volker Hüls, who prepared the Synthesis Report and this summary report. The synthesis benefitted from the guidance of an advisory group, which had significant involvement throughout the process including review of the analytical framework and of several drafts of the report. Chaired by Koorosh Raffi, Senior Evaluation Specialist in the Evaluation Office, this advisory group brought together UNICEF colleagues from several offices and included Kate Alley, Hamish Young, Cecilia Sanchez-Bodas, Stephen Arnaud, Genevieve Boutin, Iain Murray, Mads Oyen, Edward Addai and Inoussa Kabore. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Evaluation Office who managed this work, namely Koorosh Raffii, Jane Mwangi and Laura Olsen.

It is our hope that this Synthesis Report will contribute to further improvements in UNICEF's life-saving work in emergencies around the globe and, in particular, help efforts to enable children and young people not only to survive disaster and conflict but to recover and build happy and productive lives in better times.

Colin Kirk
Director, Evaluation Office
UNICEF

¹ E/ICEF/2013/10: UNICEF Evaluation Office, Thematic synthesis report on evaluation of humanitarian action



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Acronyms

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations	OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
CCC	Core Commitments for Children	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
CEAP	Corporate Emergency Activation Procedure	PCA	Programme Cooperation Agreements
CEE/CIS	Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States	RO	Regional Office
EAP	East Asia and the Pacific	RRMP	Rapid Response to Movements of Population
ESA	Eastern and Southern Africa	SA	South Asia
HPM	Humanitarian Performance Monitoring	SHA	Strengthening Humanitarian Action
IAHE	Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations	SMART	Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee	SSOP	Simplified Standard Operations Procedures
IHP	International Humanitarian Principle	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
LAC	Latin America and Caribbean	WCA	West and Central Africa
MENA	Middle East and North Africa		
MIRA	Multi-Sector Initial Rapid Assessments		
NGO	Non-governmental Organization		

Executive summary

Concurrent complex and protracted emergencies have made increasing numbers of children vulnerable. It is estimated that by 2018, half of the world's poor will live in fragile situations.² Faced with rapidly increasing needs, UNICEF's humanitarian expenditure grew from just over \$900 million in 2012 to \$2.1 billion in 2015.³ This increase has intensified calls to support learning from, and accountability of, its humanitarian action and prompted UNICEF's Evaluation Office to undertake this synthesis.

This report, which updates a similar exercise conducted in 2013, brings together the findings of 30 evaluations of humanitarian action published between 2010 and 2016. It asks three questions: how has UNICEF's humanitarian action from 2010 to 2015 performed, and how has it improved over time? What factors have supported or constrained improvement? What can be learned, and what improvements made for the future?

EVALUATION COVERAGE

Between 2010 and 2016,⁴ UNICEF published 76 evaluations or evaluative documents that covered humanitarian action – from preparedness through response and recovery.⁵ The Synthesis found these evaluations covered diverse geographical regions, a range of emergency types and key sectors. However, the bulk of what are classified as Level 1 emergencies remains largely unevaluated and there were gaps in systematic evaluation coverage of the Core Commitments for Children (CCCs) and the International Humanitarian Principles.

EVIDENCE BASE AND METHODS

From the 76 documents mentioned above, 30 evaluations of humanitarian action were carefully chosen based on set criteria and subsequently subjected to systematic review. The review applied an analytical framework to ensure consistent extraction of key findings.

RELEVANCE

Despite gaps in needs assessment, the majority of evaluations found UNICEF's programme responses

to be broadly aligned with humanitarian needs. However, there was evidence of opportunity-based rather than needs-based programming in emergencies. Programme strategies and designs were found to be appropriate in just under half of the evaluations that assessed country- or regional-level responses – though UNICEF showed willingness and ability to adapt, where necessary UNICEF's alignment with national priorities has been strong, where conditions permit.

ALIGNMENT WITH HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES AND COMMITMENTS

Only a third of the evaluations assessed UNICEF's alignment with the CCCs. The majority reported difficulties in applying the CCCs systematically in different emergency types. The very few evaluations that looked at alignment with the International Humanitarian Principles raised dilemmas linked to the trade-offs needed to balance alignment with the priorities of governments or national authorities whilst meeting the needs of affected populations.

EFFECTIVENESS

Overall, the evaluations showed important results for children facing conflict and crisis. UNICEF's objectives and output and outcome targets for the interventions were met or exceeded in half of the evaluations, with the remaining half achieving moderate or mixed performance. A key achievement of UNICEF's humanitarian assistance has been the successful strengthening of national and local systems for emergency preparedness and response.

EFFICIENCY

The timeliness of UNICEF's humanitarian action has benefited in recent years from Simplified Standard Operating Procedures (SSOPs) for Level 2 and 3 emergencies. These have enabled rapid deployment of staff, swift procurement and shortened administrative procedures, and have benefited UNICEF's responses to sudden-onset emergencies. However, the timeliness of UNICEF responses has been mixed. Despite data limitations about cost-effectiveness, the majority of evaluations reported

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 'Fragile States: Domestic revenue mobilization in fragile states', Paris, 2014, p. 95.

³ Source: UNICEF internal expenditure data.

⁴ The evaluation count of all reports published on www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/ was taken in November 2016. In addition, it includes the evaluation of the response to the Ebola emergency in West Africa in 2014/15, which at the time of writing was about to be published.

⁵ Of these 76 reports, 17 were inter-agency evaluations and three were commissioned by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

that the efficiency measures implemented by UNICEF delivered cost savings, or that the costs incurred were justified in the context.

CONNECTEDNESS

Evaluations found that UNICEF is still working to build clear links between humanitarian and development responses. UNICEF's planning for transition and resilience has, at times, suffered external constraints, including a lack of external funding for such activities. Integrated programming across sectors remains a clear area of weakness in UNICEF humanitarian action over time; the UNICEF structure of distinct programme sections, mirroring the sectoral division of the CCCs, does not facilitate cross-sectoral links.

COHERENCE

Evaluations reported strong external coherence of UNICEF's humanitarian action with joint response plans. Despite weaknesses in United Nations coordination mechanisms, almost all evaluations found UNICEF's humanitarian action to be coherent with the actions of other partners working in the context and praised its cluster leadership, although there was a mixed record of operational coordination with partner United Nations agencies. Efforts to develop and maintain strong partnerships with key central government actors were noted as being particularly strong.

CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

The Synthesis found that equity approaches have not been consistently implemented in UNICEF's humanitarian action. Less than half of the evaluations found equity concerns satisfactorily integrated into responses. There were clear gaps or weaknesses in UNICEF's implementation of Accountability to Affected Population (AAP) commitments, although there was also evidence of gradual improvement in some areas. The evidence base on protection was limited.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. More stringent requirements to evaluate**
UNICEF has gathered a considerable body of evidence on its humanitarian action (76 evaluations since 2010). Its Evaluation Policy states that

evaluations of humanitarian action will 'usually be undertaken'. Yet despite a set of corporate triggers, coverage remains unsystematic and patchy – particularly of Level 1 emergencies.

- 2. Centralize needs in design**
Evaluations found that UNICEF's humanitarian action was often insufficiently grounded in needs assessments, even where these were feasible. Programme designs require clearer links to needs.
- 3. Build a culture of confidence in procedures**
Given its highly decentralized nature, guidance and procedures issued 'from the centre' are only ever as influential as UNICEF's country management and staff habits permit them to be. New protocols and procedures, such as the Level 2 and 3 SSOPs, need to be accompanied by capacity development and training to build a 'risk-willing' approach.
- 4. Intensify the approach to risk-informed programming within the localization agenda**
UNICEF's decentralized structure means that it benefits from a vast cadre of national staff and partners, which provide it with a core capability to prepare for humanitarian action from a localized viewpoint. Under Grand Bargain commitments, preparedness and risk identification should be approached from this perspective.
- 5. Revisit the CCCs**
The CCCs in their current formulation do not reflect the changing nature of humanitarian crises, and promote siloed rather than integrated responses.
- 6. Accountability with flexibility**
Performance monitoring of humanitarian action is a consistent challenge, yet the evaluations analysed here found considerable scope to improve UNICEF's monitoring of its own performance in emergencies, in line with recent internal efforts to strengthen Humanitarian Performance Monitoring.⁶
- 7. Link programme integration to recovery**
A more explicit and defined strategic overview within UNICEF's humanitarian action is needed, which is firmly geared to resilience and transition goals. This should be linked to the revisited CCCs.

⁶ A full review of the HPM approach in 2016, included in the synthesis of non-evaluative work, found similarly that HPM is often seen as being too rigid, often separate from existing monitoring and evaluation systems at the country level, and not always offering appropriate indicators. Its recommendations are presently being actioned by UNICEF.



1

Introduction

The past decade has seen the humanitarian landscape experience unprecedented change. Concurrent complex and protracted emergencies have left vastly increased numbers of vulnerable children. From 66 million per year in the 1990s, in 2016, an estimated 535 million children – nearly a quarter of the world’s children – lived in countries affected by armed conflict, violence, disaster and chronic crises.⁷ By 2018, it is estimated that half the world’s poor will live in fragile situations.⁸

At the same time, the global humanitarian system has experienced a major change. Following weaknesses⁹ identified in the international response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the humanitarian system has sought stronger leadership, greater coordination and increased accountability for humanitarian action. UNICEF, as a leading humanitarian actor, has played a critical role in these global humanitarian reforms.

Faced with rapidly increasing needs, UNICEF’s humanitarian expenditure grew from just over \$900 million in 2012 to \$2.1 billion in 2015.¹⁰ Such substantial expenditure has increased the organizational focus on improving systems and approaches for emergency preparedness and response. It has also intensified calls to support learning from, and accountability of, its humanitarian action.

This Synthesis report brings together the findings of 30 Evaluations of Humanitarian Action. They span the period from 2010, when UNICEF underwent the formative experience of the Haiti earthquake, through to 2016, when its responses to the Ebola and Central African Republic crises were evaluated.

The Synthesis asks three questions:

- How has UNICEF’s humanitarian action from 2010 to 2015 performed, and how has it improved over time?
- What factors have supported or constrained improvement?
- What can be learned, and what improvements made for the future?

This report updates a similar exercise conducted in 2013. Its overarching aims are to support accountability, contribute to learning, and help UNICEF realize its humanitarian objectives for the vulnerable children it serves. A full version of this report will be made available at UNICEF’s evaluation website:
<https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_100819.html>

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This Synthesis begins with a description of UNICEF’s arrangements for humanitarian action, and their evolution since 2010. It then describes how evaluations have assessed humanitarian action, and the specific evidence base for this Synthesis. Next it presents the main findings of the Synthesis report, including strengths and weaknesses, as well as factors that have supported or constrained performance. Finally, it provides the conclusions and lessons arising from the evidence, followed by some recommendations for the future.

⁷ United Nations Children’s Fund, ‘Nearly a Quarter of the World’s Children Live in Conflict or Disaster-Stricken Countries’, press release, <www.unicef.org/media/media_93863.html>, December 2016.

⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, ‘Fragile States: Domestic revenue mobilization in fragile states’, Paris, 2014, p. 95.

⁹ Grünewald, F. and A. Binder, *Inter-agency real-time evaluation in Haiti: 3 months after the earthquake*, 2010.

¹⁰ Source: UNICEF internal expenditure data.



2

UNICEF's arrangements for humanitarian action

REFORMING THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

Although reforms to the humanitarian system began in 2005, the year 2010 was a watershed for the humanitarian community. Emergency responses to crises in Haiti and Pakistan exposed critical flaws and gaps in the coordination of complex and large emergencies. The collective experience triggered the Transformative Agenda, which created major changes in the way humanitarian responses are implemented, organized and arranged. In 2014, the Core Humanitarian Standard¹¹ was adopted by many humanitarian organizations.¹²

In June 2016, the World Humanitarian Summit addressed topics including humanitarian financing, bridging the humanitarian-development divide, strengthening local ownership of the response, and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP). The Summit outcomes included the Grand Bargain on flexible and appropriate funding.

IMPROVING UNICEF'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION

At the same time, UNICEF has undertaken its own corporate reform process. In 2010 it published its revised Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (CCC),¹³ which form the central programmatic framework for its humanitarian action:

Based on international human rights, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and international humanitarian law, [the CCC] define operational commitments for UNICEF-led humanitarian action. They can be applied in acute and protracted humanitarian situations, and their sector-specific programme commitments define minimum achievements to be realized for all children affected by an emergency. The CCC are designed to support wider inter-agency cluster coordination.

Other reforms, particularly enacted following a critical evaluation of its response to the Haiti emergency in 2010,¹⁴ included:

- the reinstatement of the fast-track recruitment process for emergencies, the absence of which had severely constrained scaling-up in Haiti;¹⁵
- the institution of new structures for emergency response, with the overall framework provided by the Corporate Emergency Activation Procedure (CEAP), introduced in March 2011¹⁶ and including Simplified Standard Operations Procedures (SSOPs) for Level 3 emergencies;¹⁷ and
- the introduction of Humanitarian Performance Monitoring (HPM) indicators, to enable systematic corporate measurement of emergency responses.

The Strengthening Humanitarian Assistance with Action (SHA) initiative in 2013 and 2014 refined these new systems. Example changes included:

- new guidance on cluster coordination, preparedness, and on children and armed conflict;
- strengthened humanitarian leadership training; and
- a more formalized emergency recruitment system.

In 2013, Level 2 SSOPs were introduced to address large-scale emergencies that remain below the Level 3 threshold. Level 3 SSOPs were revised in 2015 after the conclusion of the SHA.

Since their development, these strengthened procedures have been tested in many different emergencies, including in conflict-related crises in the Central African Republic and South Sudan in 2013; the natural disaster of typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in the same year; in the insurgency faced by Iraq from 2014; and in the complex and protracted Syria emergency, which has continued since 2011. The application of these procedures in these different events has generated much learning and experience.

¹¹ The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) sets out Nine Commitments that organisations and individuals involved in humanitarian response can use to improve the quality and effectiveness of the assistance they provide. This single core standard has been devised to clarify the responsibilities of aid workers, make the implementation of humanitarian standards simpler and easier, and contribute to better humanitarian responses. <https://corehumanitarianstandard.org>

¹² UNICEF committed to the Core Humanitarian Standard at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.

¹³ United Nations Children's Fund, Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action, 2010. <https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/CCC_042010.pdf>.

¹⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, Independent review of UNICEF's operational response to the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, 2011.

¹⁵ Enrico Leonardi, Jessica Alexander, and David Bassiouni, Review of the fast track recruitment process, UNICEF Division of Human Resources, 2013.

¹⁶ CF/EXD/2011-001 of 21 March 2011

¹⁷ CF/EXD/2012-001 of 1 March 2012



3

UNICEF'S evaluative
coverage of
humanitarian action

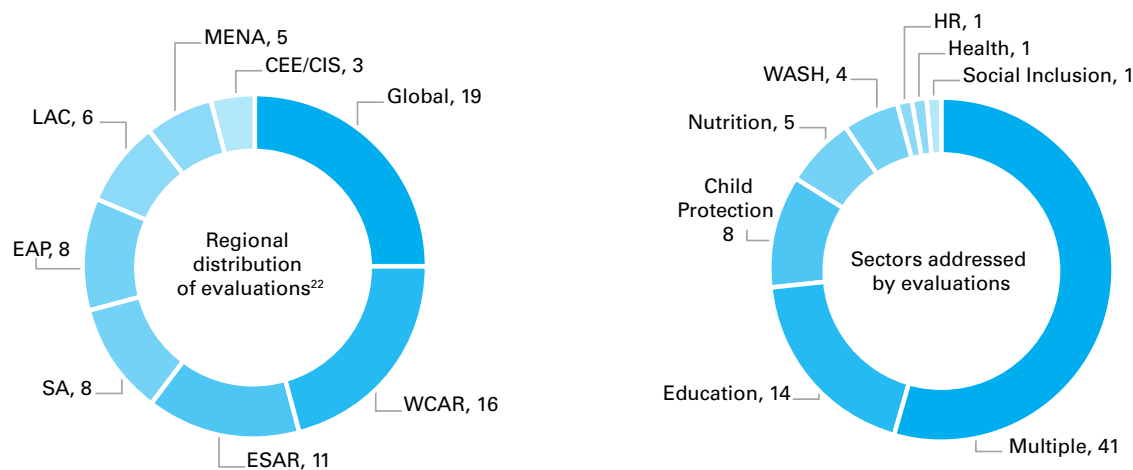
Evaluation is not the only tool applied by UNICEF to assess its humanitarian action; lessons learned and reviews also provide insight.¹⁸ However, with its dual emphasis on accountability and learning, evaluation can offer an especially rigorous evidence base. This section of the report describes the evaluative coverage of UNICEF’s humanitarian action between 2010 and 2016.

UNICEF’s institutional systems suggest ‘triggers’ to evaluate its humanitarian action. As per the 2013 Evaluation Policy, the triggers include scale (when responding to major humanitarian emergencies) and/or expenditure (when more than \$10 million is spent per programme outcome result component).¹⁹ Level 3 SSOPs also integrate evaluation as part of the programme cycle.

UNICEF-commissioned evaluations assessed a significant proportion of its humanitarian spending. Between 2010 and 2016,²⁰ UNICEF published 623 evaluations or evaluative documents. Of these, 76 covered humanitarian action – from preparedness through response and recovery.²¹ Humanitarian evaluations covered a significant proportion of the largest emergency interventions: In the period from January 2012 to December 2015 more than half – 53 per cent (\$1.57 billion) – of UNICEF’s total humanitarian expenditure on Level 2 and Level 3 responses (\$3 billion) was assessed by 12 large evaluations.

Figure 1 below illustrates the evaluative picture of UNICEF’s humanitarian action between 2010 and 2016.

Figure 1: Characteristics of humanitarian evaluations 2010-2016 (76 evaluations total)



¹⁸ To ensure that the present synthesis of evaluations was balanced by such complementary evidence, a separate synthesis of non-evaluative work was undertaken in parallel and has served to validate the analysis presented in this report. Due to its characteristics, the non-evaluative work provided knowledge of a more operational nature than that found in formal evaluations.

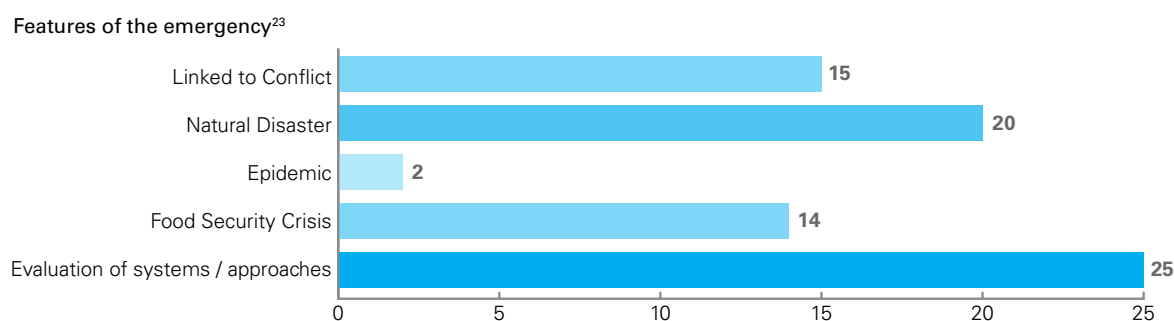
¹⁹ <www.uneval.org/document/detail/78>

²⁰ The evaluation count of all reports published on www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/ was taken in November 2016. In addition, it includes the evaluation of the response to the Ebola emergency in West Africa in 2014/15, which at the time of writing was about to be published.

²¹ Of these 76 reports, 17 were inter-agency evaluations and three were commissioned by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

²² UNICEF regions are: CEE/CIS – Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States; EAP – East Asia and the Pacific; ESA – Eastern and Southern Africa; LAC – Latin America and Caribbean; MENA – Middle East and North Africa; SA – South Asia; WCA – West and Central Africa

Figure 1 (ctd.): **Characteristics of humanitarian evaluations 2010-2016 (76 evaluations total)**



In summary, this picture finds that:

Coverage of key sectors has been comprehensive

In terms of sector coverage, most sectors have been well explored, with education being the most prominent in standalone sector-specific evaluations, while health has been mostly well covered in multi-sector evaluations. The only 'pure' health emergency in the reviewed period was the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which was addressed by a standalone evaluation.

Evaluations were geographically diverse and covered a range of emergency types

The 76 evaluations of humanitarian action were undertaken across all seven regions in which UNICEF engages. They addressed six of the seven sectors in the UNICEF strategic plan 2014-2017,²⁴ with just over half covering multi-sector humanitarian responses. The most evaluated emergencies were linked to natural disasters, followed by those associated with conflict. A substantial proportion of humanitarian evaluations also covered global approaches or emergency-related systems.

Coverage of emergencies below Levels 2 and 3 has been weaker

Perhaps because of the triggers for evaluation (paragraph 15 above), all of UNICEF'S Level 3 responses and most Level 2 responses since 2012 have been evaluated either by an inter-agency or a UNICEF-specific study.²⁵ However, most such evaluations were commissioned centrally, rather than by country or regional offices. Thus, the bulk of humanitarian action taking place below the Level 2 and Level 3 classification remains un-evaluated. Evaluation coverage data (paragraph 17 above) reflects this picture, with evaluation expenditure taking place mostly in Level 2 and Level 3 responses. Although it has corporate triggers in place, UNICEF places much reliance for evaluating humanitarian action on country or regional office willingness and ability.

²³ Reflects the prominent features of the crisis as described in evaluations. Evaluations of systems/approaches may include global evaluations of humanitarian response systems or corporate approaches.

²⁴ Excluding HIV/AIDS in emergencies, for which no evaluation was available.

²⁵ An Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Iraq response was planned, but has been suspended. Emergencies in the Nigeria region and in Yemen have been evaluated recently, but the reports were not released in time to be included in this synthesis. The Level 2 response to the storms in the Pacific Islands has not been formally evaluated.

There was some duplication and overlap of evaluations

This Synthesis found that evaluations of the same crisis, in the same place, were commissioned but lacked interconnection. For example, of four evaluations of UNICEF's response to the Syria regional crisis, at least two occurred in the same country (Jordan) and evaluated two sectors with common connections (education and child protection). Both were conducted in the same year (2015). Neither references the other, nor makes explicit linkages to closely related sister sectors. UNICEF could gain substantial added value by linking up such exercises.

There were gaps in systematic evaluation coverage of the CCC and the International Humanitarian Principles (IHPs).

Evaluations have not systematically addressed the CCC, reflecting the findings of the predecessor 2013 Synthesis. Nor have they analysed adherence to the IHPs,²⁶ in common with a finding by the wider United Nations Evaluation Group.²⁷

Joint commissioning was weaker than in 2013

The 2013 Synthesis found that the majority of the humanitarian evaluations assessed were jointly commissioned. However, only four in this sample were conducted jointly with other United Nations agencies, or were jointly commissioned by government.²⁸ Yet, partnerships for evaluation are a key element of UNICEF's 2013 Evaluation Policy.²⁹

²⁶ Humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

²⁷ United Nations Evaluation Group, *Reflecting Humanitarian Principles in Evaluation*, 2016.

²⁸ See paragraph 26 on the role of inter-agency humanitarian evaluations.

²⁹ United Nations Children's Fund, *Revised Evaluation Policy of UNICEF*, April 2013.



4

Conduct of the
synthesis and
limitations

This Synthesis has been developed from a selection of 30 evaluations, distilled from the wider pool of 76 evaluations. Criteria for inclusion were as follows:

- First, only documents with a strongly evaluative approach were included. This excluded, for example, reviews, research reports and other material such as Lessons Learned documents.
- Second, only reports receiving a ‘satisfactory’ rating in the UNICEF quality assurance mechanism for evaluations³⁰ were included, to ensure that evidence was sufficiently valid and reliable.

Two other forms of evidence provided triangulation:

- Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHEs), which provide evidence of the system-wide response but do not report on UNICEF performance specifically.³¹
- The 2017 report *Learning from Humanitarian Action: a synthesis of non-evaluative documents on UNICEF’s humanitarian action from 2010-2016*, which brings together evidence from reviews and other relevant sources.

The 30 evaluations cover all major emergencies to which UNICEF has responded since 2010, excluding those in the Horn of Africa, South Sudan and Iraq, which were addressed or intended to be addressed through inter-agency evaluations. The evaluation subjects of the 30 evaluations are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Characteristics of included evaluations

Key characteristics	Number of evaluations
Evaluation of global operational systems	3
Evaluation of global approaches or key humanitarian functions of UNICEF	4
Evaluation of multi-country responses	5
Evaluation of single country responses	18
Total	30

Process: The 30 evaluations were systematically reviewed, applying an analytical framework to ensure consistent extraction of key findings.³² This included the evaluation criteria of *relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and co-ordination* plus other lines of analytical fields of interest. A second-layer quality assessment for individual data pieces was then applied. Evidence was rated for validity and reliability on a scale of 1 (low) to 4 (high), with only reliable evidence – scoring at least 2 – included. This approach allowed the strength of evidence underlying each finding to be made explicit.

The availability (density) of evidence against individual themes overall³³ covered within evaluations is set out in Figure 2 below (weak: 1-9 evaluations out of 30; moderate: 10-19 evaluations out of 30; strong: 20 or more evaluations out of 30). For example, the density of the evidence for efficiency was made up for two components of efficiency (cost-effectiveness and timeliness). 14 evaluations assessed cost-effectiveness (moderate) and 22 evaluations assessed timeliness (strong), thus efficiency was determined to have moderate-strong density.

Figure 2: Density of evidence

Theme	Evidence density
Relevance	Moderate → Strong
Effectiveness	Moderate → Strong
Efficiency	Moderate → Strong
Connectedness	Moderate → Strong
Coherence	Moderate → Strong
Cross-cutting issues	Weak → Strong
Alignment with key principles and commitments	Weak → Moderate

Limitations: The main limitations of this Synthesis are: (i) its reliance on evidence from its component evaluations; and (ii) its reference period of 2010 to 2016, which restricts its ability to illustrate corporate changes within UNICEF that are not yet reflected in evaluations. Nonetheless, the breadth and depth of its evidence base – 30 high-quality evaluations conducted over a six-year period – enable it to provide an accurate reflection of UNICEF’s performance in humanitarian action between 2010 and 2016.

³⁰ The UNICEF Global Evaluation Reports Oversight System (GEROS); details can be found at <www.unicef.org/evaluation/index_GEROS.html>

³¹ Conducted to date for the Central African Republic, Typhoon Haiyan and South Sudan crises.

³² See Annex 2 in the main synthesis report for further details on the methodology

³³ The density of evidence of the overall themes in Figure 2 refers to the distribution of the density of evidence for each individual component in the analytical field.



5

Findings

1 HOW RELEVANT WAS UNICEF'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION TO HUMANITARIAN NEEDS?

Evidence base: moderate-strong

14/30 evaluations assessed UNICEF's needs assessment underlying the designs of its humanitarian action.

27/30 evaluations assessed alignment with humanitarian needs/findings from joint assessments.



Limited prioritization of needs assessments within humanitarian action

Despite evidence of UNICEF's advocacy within United Nations Country Teams for Multi-Sector Initial Rapid Assessments (MIRA), the evaluations reflected continued deficiencies in the swift implementation of these. In terms of UNICEF's needs assessments specifically, the 2013 Synthesis identified weaknesses in these, finding that they either did not take place, or were incomplete, or formed only general situation analyses.³⁴

In 2017, four evaluations praised UNICEF's prioritization of needs assessments.³⁵ However, 8 out of 14 evaluations still found gaps or limitations.

Examples include:

- In the response to the Nepal earthquake in 2015, UNICEF failed to convince the international community to implement a MIRA, but instead of conducting its own assessments, it relied on limited government data. A similar critique was made of the response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013-2014.
- Insufficiently detailed analysis of caseloads. Although in some instances caseload estimations were based on Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions (SMART) surveys, these provide only a very broad picture of needs, as the evaluation of the Sahel food and nutrition crisis response points out.

- There were gaps in consultations with affected communities. For example, during the Sahel food crisis of 2010-2011; in the response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013-2014; and in the Central African Republic in 2013-2015.

Strong alignment with humanitarian needs

Despite these gaps, the majority of relevant evaluations – 18 of 27 – found UNICEF's programme responses to be broadly aligned with humanitarian needs. However, 9 of 27 evaluations identified opportunity-based rather than needs-based programming. This occurred in at least four major emergencies spanning 2010-2016: the Sahel crisis of 2010-2011; the Central African Republic during 2013-2015; some elements of the Typhoon Haiyan response in 2013; and the response to the Syria regional emergency in 2011-2015.

Three evaluations also found coverage gaps. In the North Yemen and Sahel crises of 2010-2011, programme responses did not address all the needs that fell within UNICEF's purview. During the Ebola outbreak in West and Central Africa in 2014-2015, UNICEF's response neither promptly nor adequately addressed Ebola's serious secondary humanitarian consequences for the protection, general health and education of children.

³⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, Thematic synthesis report on evaluation of humanitarian action, 2013.

³⁵ Two corporate initiatives, namely, the Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy programme, and the Rapid Response to Population Movements (RRPM) initiative in the Democratic Republic of Congo; and two emergency responses, namely, the responses to the cholera outbreak in Haiti in 2010-2015 and to the nutrition crisis in Somalia in 2011-2012.

2 HOW APPROPRIATE WERE THE STRATEGIES OR DESIGNS USED FOR UNICEF'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION?

Evidence base: moderate-strong

27/30 evaluations assessed UNICEF's appropriateness of strategy and design, of which 23 were evaluations of country or regionally-based humanitarian action and 4 were evaluations of corporate action.



Mixed strategic appropriateness but willingness to adapt

Programme strategies or designs were found to be appropriate in just under half of the evaluations that assessed country- or regional-level responses – though UNICEF showed willingness and ability to adapt where necessary. Examples include:

- A calculated risk to apply a cash and vouchers response to the Horn of Africa drought in Somalia in 2011-2012, which paid off – markets responded and people could buy the food they needed at reasonable prices.
- In Pakistan, in response to a large public hygiene crisis following floods in 2011, UNICEF chose a development-focused approach, geared to longer-term behaviour change, which addressed underlying vulnerabilities more sustainably than short-term relief.
- In the North Yemen crisis of 2010, as well as in Rwanda in 2012-2013, incorrect assumptions made at the outset were course-corrected quickly in response to the reality on the ground.

Weak strategic frameworks or designs

Of the 14 evaluations that identified weaknesses, the main concern related to a limited or absent strategic framework at the outset. For example:

- In the Central African Republic, UNICEF's approach (in common with the wider United Nations response)³⁶ was characterized as reactive/ad-hoc planning in emergency mode, rather than being based on a strategic vision including medium- to longer-term goals.
- In the Syria regional crisis, UNICEF lacked an initial strategy that linked systematic situation analysis, needs and vulnerability assessments to programme decisions (the 'why').
- The Ebola crisis response was marked by a 'proliferation of strategies'.

The evaluations also found that often, the assumptions made in design were linked to weak needs assessments. For example, in the Typhoon Haiyan response of 2013, UNICEF's approach of setting up child-friendly schools as the primary child protection response was a standardized approach, which assumed that such schools were unquestionably the most appropriate child protection response to an emergency. This assumption, the evaluation found, did not hold, with communities articulating different needs and priorities.

³⁶ Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation, Central African Republic

3 WAS UNICEF'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION ALIGNED WITH NATIONAL PRIORITIES?

Evidence base: moderate-strong

18/30 evaluations assessed UNICEF's alignment with national priorities.



Strong alignment with national priorities where conditions permitted

Twelve out of the 18 evaluations found that UNICEF's humanitarian action was well aligned with national priorities where conditions permitted. This was largely due to an explicit focus on alignment in design – for example, in the response to the Nepal earthquake and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. In Turkey, alignment was helped by strong national ownership of the humanitarian response to the Syria regional crisis.

Six evaluations found weaknesses. These mainly arose from two gaps:

- *Insufficient consideration of local systems:* For example, setting up child-friendly schools in the Philippines during the Typhoon Haiyan response and in support of Syrian child refugees in Jordan, which were in competition with local schools or early childhood care.
- *Delinkage from relevant national mechanisms or policies,* particularly where these were institutionally weak. For example, the national systems for food security and nutrition during the Sahel crisis or, more recently, national priorities for health systems strengthening, which became overwhelmed during the Ebola crisis.

4 HOW WELL ALIGNED WAS UNICEF'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION WITH KEY INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLES?

Evidence base: weak-moderate

3/30 UNICEF evaluations reported explicitly and substantively on alignment with the international humanitarian principles.

10/30 evaluations assessed the alignment of UNICEF's interventions with the CCCs.



Limited evidence and context-based challenges in alignment with the international humanitarian principles/CCCs

The only three evaluations that assessed the international humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity³⁷ raise familiar dilemmas. They point to UNICEF's challenges with regard to the need to align with national authorities whilst meeting the needs of affected populations. Evaluations of UNICEF's responses in Nepal and Syria voice this concern, as does the evaluation of UNICEF's Cluster Lead Agency role.

Just 10 of the 30 evaluations systematically assessed the CCCs. Three of these³⁸ found UNICEF's humanitarian action to be well aligned with the CCCs, whilst six others found a mixed picture or gaps. All these six argue for greater contextualization of the CCCs to the different emergency types UNICEF and other international actors currently face, including slow onset crises; crises with strong protection dimensions, such as Syria; protracted emergencies; or public health emergencies such as Ebola.

³⁷ <https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf>

³⁸ These were the response to the Nepal earthquake, the provision of psychosocial support for Syrian children in Jordan, and the Supply Division's emergency response.

Box 1 Challenges of alignment with the CCCs

- In the Central African Republic in 2013-15, the evaluation found that shifting to a CCC approach was not necessarily appropriate in a protracted, slow onset crisis. The CCCs' discrete phases of disaster preparedness, disaster response and early recovery were not fully adapted to a crisis that had both acute and chronic dimensions.
- In the Ebola emergency in West Africa, the evaluation found that the CCCs were neither fully appropriate nor relevant to a public health emergency. Consequently, UNICEF's response was not well aligned with them.
- The evaluation of UNICEF's response to the Syria regional crisis found that the CCCs lacked coherence with the crisis' specific characteristics: a protracted crisis in a middle-income context with a strong protection component.
- The evaluation of the Child Protection in Emergencies strategy points out that addressing issues around justice for children in the CCCs is confined to the recovery phase.

5 HOW WELL DID UNICEF'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION PERFORM AGAINST ITS INTENDED TARGETS?

Evidence base: moderate-strong

All 30 evaluations assessed the effectiveness of UNICEF's humanitarian responses.



Mixed performance in achieving results

As in the 2013 Synthesis, around half of the evaluations of UNICEF's humanitarian action contained solid evidence of results. UNICEF's objectives and/or output and outcome targets for the interventions were also met or exceeded in half of the evaluations (15 of the 30 evaluations), with the remaining half finding moderate or mixed performance.

Most evaluations reported on output targets, applying HPM indicators. Thirteen evaluated at the output level and indicated that output targets were met or exceeded. For example:

- In the Democratic Republic of Congo, 93 per cent of the nearly 130,000 vulnerable households identified were supported.
- In the response to the cholera outbreak in Haiti in 2011, UNICEF and its partners detected and treated over 45,000 cases. The national incidence for 2014 and 2015 was reduced from 0.25 per cent to 0.16 per cent.

Some evaluations found overall positive achievement against objectives, but with mixed performance within different programmatic areas. For example, in the

response to Typhoon Haiyan, water, sanitation and hygiene, education and health interventions performed well against intended targets, but nutrition and child protection initiatives struggled, in part due to over-estimation of caseloads.

Some significant outcome-level gains

Evaluations also recorded some significant outcome-level results arising either as a direct result of UNICEF's interventions (attribution) or with UNICEF's interventions playing a significant role (contribution). These include:

- Reduction of disease prevalence and prevention of further infection in Haiti in 2013; during the Typhoon Haiyan response in 2013; and in the Somalia (2011), Ebola (2014-15) and Nepal (2015) responses.
- Changes in community behaviour as a consequence of the Ebola response.
- Children returned to their families, and children going back to school after the Nepal earthquake in 2015.
- Release of children and reunification in several child protection interventions in emergencies.

6 HOW WELL DID UNICEF'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION BUILD NATIONAL AND LOCAL CAPACITY?

Evidence base: moderate-strong

19/30 evaluations assessed UNICEF's efforts to support national capacity building.

15/30 evaluations assessed UNICEF's efforts to build capacity of local or other sub-national partners.



Strong results in systems strengthening

A key achievement of UNICEF's humanitarian action, identified in both the 2013 Synthesis exercise and this 2017 update, has been the successful strengthening of national and local systems for emergency preparedness and response. Ten evaluations found national-level capacity gains as a result of UNICEF interventions, and 12 found local-level improvements. Achievements arose from two main factors: firstly, embedding a strong systems-building approach from the start, for example in the Central African Republic, or within the Peacebuilding Education and Advocacy programme; and/or secondly, adopting active approaches to support national ownership of initiatives, as for example in Nepal and North Yemen.

Fifteen evaluations found that UNICEF's intended results were not achieved. The reasons for this include:

- technical weaknesses in the design of the intervention;
- coverage limitations, particularly for nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, and education interventions, where UNICEF did not always work in all areas of need;
- over-ambitious targets, such as in Syria, where implementation was also dependent on partner capacity;
- delivery of short-term results but limited long-term effects, for example in child-friendly schools in the Philippines (2014) and in Liberia (2013); and
- a need for a more structured and less ad-hoc approach to working with government, for example in the Philippines during Typhoon Haiyan, and in the Syria regional crisis.

7 WERE UNICEF'S HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES TIMELY?

Evidence base: moderate-strong

22/30 evaluations assessed the timeliness of UNICEF's humanitarian responses (or, in the case of corporate evaluations, initiatives that support the timeliness of responses).



External factors have impeded timeliness

External factors that have hindered the speed of UNICEF's (and the international) response include late (inter)national declarations of non-sudden onset crises, such as in the Syria regional conflict, and the late recognition of emergencies by other key international actors, as in the Ebola crisis in West Africa. Underfunding and delays in donor funding/unavailability of pooled funding mechanisms have also constrained quick responses on the ground.

Mixed performance in timeliness continues

Both the 2013 and this 2017 Synthesis found mixed timeliness with regard to UNICEF's humanitarian responses. Seven of the 22 evaluations analysed in 2017 found UNICEF's overall response to the crisis to be timely. The revised Level 2 and 3 SSOPs have been a major contributory factor here, with benefits – applied across emergency responses – including:

- rapid deployment of immediate response teams;

- fast-tracking of human resource and recruitment processes;
- swift procurement processes; and
- fast-tracking of other administrative requirements.

However, seven evaluations also found some staff reluctant to apply the new SSOPs – particularly given financial accountability risks relating to Programme Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with partners. This reluctance caused delayed processing – of up to five

months – of agreements during the Typhoon Haiyan disaster, the Syria emergency, and the Central African Republic crisis.

Slower than necessary responses, found in 15 of the 22 evaluations, mostly related to either a slow start-up which then gained momentum, such as in the Syria regional response, or a swift start-up which then encountered delays once the immediate response was underway, for example in Turkey’s Van-Ercis earthquake in 2011 and the Mali crisis of 2012.

Box 2 Changing speeds in emergency response

Following activation of the Level 2 response for the Nepal earthquake, UNICEF’s initial response was fast and described as ‘outstanding’, characterized by a significant initial field presence, and early mobilization of supplies, funds and partners. But subsequently, challenges in timeliness contributed to a slower response between October and February 2016. These challenges included late delivery of goods and activities, lack of experience with Level 2 procedures, and the low performance of partners.

8 WERE UNICEF’S HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES COST-EFFECTIVE?

Evidence base: moderate-strong

14/30 evaluations assessed the cost-effectiveness of UNICEF’s humanitarian responses.



Costs reasonable for the response

For the 14 humanitarian evaluations that had information available, the majority (10 of the 14) found UNICEF’s costs to be reasonable for the response. Evaluations identified some strong efforts to produce efficiency gains, such as in Jordan, where the cost of the psychosocial support per child was reduced by almost half. Both evaluations that assessed the cost-effectiveness of cash transfers in emergencies (Nepal earthquake and Somalia) found high levels of cost-efficiency.

Weaknesses arising from context

Weaknesses in cost-efficiency were specific to context, including expensive sanitation solutions during the cholera outbreak in Haiti; and high transaction costs with implementing partners during the Typhoon Haiyan response.

Box 3 UNICEF and cost-efficiency

- In the Nepal earthquake response, it cost UNICEF’s Social Policy top-up cash transfer \$0.6 million to disburse \$12.4 million to 434,000 beneficiaries.
- In Somalia, on average 85 per cent of project budgets were transferred to beneficiaries, with a range of 80 to 90 per cent.

9 HOW CONNECTED WERE UNICEF'S INTERVENTIONS TO OTHER UNICEF OPERATIONS IN THE COUNTRY?

Evidence base: moderate-strong

10/30 evaluations assessed UNICEF's links to other operations in the country or regional context (development or other programming).



Suspension of existing country programmes to address emergencies

Under UNICEF's Level 2 and 3 emergency procedures, if a sudden-onset crisis occurs, country programmes can be suspended to direct resources towards immediate needs. All sudden-onset emergencies assessed for this Synthesis report (Typhoon Haiyan, and the earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal) resulted in UNICEF suspending its existing country programmes.

Weak links from emergency to development programmes

Ten evaluations assessed links to country operations. Nine of these found a lack of connection between emergency responses and country (often development-oriented) programmes, for example, in UNICEF's responses to the Central African Republic emergency and to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. In these situations, country office staff roles were left unclear and sometimes bypassed during the emergency. As well as complicating coordination on the ground, this left a difficult legacy for the country office to follow once the emergency was over.

10 TO WHAT EXTENT HAS UNICEF'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION BEEN LINKED TO TRANSITION?

Evidence base: moderate-strong

20/30 evaluations assessed UNICEF's links to transition or resilience strategies in the context (bridging the humanitarian-development divide).



External factors hindered links to transition and resilience

The evaluations identified a range of external factors that hindered UNICEF's planning for transition and resilience, including a lack of external funding for recovery efforts post-emergency, as, for example, in the Central African Republic and Ebola crises; the lack of ability to 'flex' donor funding streams, from development to emergency and vice-versa; and a lack of clear policy guidance on early recovery and transition within the CCCs, as the Nepal earthquake evaluation pointed out.

Room for improvement in linking emergency response to transition

Overall, however, 17 out of the 20 evaluations found that UNICEF had not yet successfully integrated links to transition, even during more recent crises such as the Syria and Ebola emergency responses. Lessons identified by the evaluations include:

- The need for a *clear transition plan* and links from response to early recovery from the outset and across sectors, with accompanying investment.
- The importance of *preparedness*, and particularly the ability to 'flex' programming and capacities from development to emergency and vice-versa if emergency strikes.
- Where plans are present, the need for *overall consistency*, with variation among sector plans.
- The need to *seize opportunities to address social change*, rather than missing opportunities.
- The need to *participate in national assessments and planning* for recovery and reconstruction.
- The importance of *moving from emergency to transition* as soon as conditions permit.
- The need for clarity over the *process of exit* from emergency procedures, and the related processes such as the withdrawal of the immediate response team.

11 HOW WELL HAS UNICEF INTEGRATED ITS HUMANITARIAN ACTION ACROSS SECTORS?

Evidence base: moderate-strong

14/30 evaluations assessed the integration of UNICEF's programming in emergencies.



Limited integration of humanitarian action

The UNICEF structure of distinct programme sections, mirroring the sectoral division of the CCCs, does not facilitate cross-sectoral links. Only two of the evaluations analysed for this Synthesis found well-integrated responses, and three noted gradual improvements over time. Weak integration mainly arose from:

- *Insufficiently holistic needs assessments* to set the basis for a better integrated response.
- *Lack of inter-section planning/preparedness*, including integrating actions with common objectives to avoid supply-driven responses, identified in 11 evaluations.
- *Lack of internal operational coordination*, also identified in 11 evaluations, sometimes despite strong planning within documentation.
- *Siloed approaches by sector from the regional office*, which has also influenced country office implementation.

12 HOW COHERENT IS UNICEF'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION WITH THAT OF OTHER PARTNERS OPERATING IN THE CONTEXT?

Evidence base: moderate-strong

13/30 evaluations assessed UNICEF's coherence with joint response plans.

24/30 evaluations assessed UNICEF's coherence with the actions of other partners operating in the context and/or its cluster leadership.

17/30 evaluations assessed UNICEF's choice and selection of partners (rationales, inclusion/exclusion, balance of partners).



Coherence is fundamental to UNICEF's operating modalities

UNICEF is cluster (co) lead at the global and country levels for the water, sanitation and hygiene, education and nutrition clusters, and leads the Area of Responsibility for child protection. Coherence is therefore an integral part of its operating modalities.

Strong coherence with strategic response plans and national government plans

The evaluations found UNICEF's strategic planning to be mostly coherent with strategic response plans at the country level. The strongest area of partnership was with national government or authorities. In Turkey, for example, UNICEF applied its close working relationship with the Ministry of Education to help widen access

for the education component of its response to previously inaccessible host communities. During the Typhoon Haiyan response, UNICEF signed memoranda of understanding with 40 local government units in affected areas of the Philippines where it had not worked previously.

Mixed experience in partnerships with United Nations agencies but effective cluster leadership

The evaluations found some weaknesses in partnerships with United Nations agencies. These arose in part from a systemic lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, for example in the initial phases of the Syria regional response. UNICEF's cluster leadership at the country level was found to be broadly effective,

though roles at the regional and global levels were not always clear.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) mostly assessed as implementing partners

Partnerships with NGOs have generally been regarded as implementing partnerships and discussed in relation to the activation of PCAs. The importance of standby partnerships as part of emergency preparedness is emphasized in the Nepal evaluation,³⁹ which found no standby or contingency PCAs in place.

Willingness to engage with non-traditional partners

Several evaluations found innovative engagement with non-traditional partners, including peace committees, religious institutions, and conflict mediation groups. Collaboration with the private sector was commended in the evaluations of the Rapid Response to Movements of

Population (RRMP) in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the emergency cash transfer programme in Somalia.

Lessons regarding UNICEF's partnerships

Lessons documented by the evaluations include:

- The need for *an explicit partnership strategy*, rather than an ad-hoc approach, including how government or national authority capacity should be developed or maintained.
- The need to *recognize in contracting with large international organizations that they work through local implementing partners*, adding an additional administrative layer and incurring a degree of risk.
- The need to *broaden the partnership base* in several contexts.

13 TO WHAT EXTENT HAS UNICEF INTEGRATED CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES INTO ITS HUMANITARIAN ACTION?

Evidence base: weak-strong

20/30 evaluations assessed the integration of equity into UNICEF's humanitarian action. (Three were conducted in 2010, prior to UNICEF's corporate renewal of the equity agenda.)

6/30 evaluations comment on protection aspects of the response.

16/30 evaluations assessed UNICEF's implementation of AAP commitments.



Inconsistent attention to equity, protection and AAP

- **Equity:** The 2013 Synthesis found inconsistent attention to equity in UNICEF's humanitarian action, linked to limited needs assessment. This 2017 Synthesis had similar findings. Seven out of 17 evaluations found that UNICEF's humanitarian action had successfully integrated equity concerns, mostly arising from strong attention at the planning stage. However, 10 evaluations found that the issue lacked systematic attention, leading to a range of specific equity gaps, identified when UNICEF's response was evaluated as a whole. Gender (in five responses), age (in two) and the disabled (in six) were identified as the main equity gaps.
- **Protection:** UNICEF has issued its own minimum standards for child protection in emergencies as part of the CCCs. However, it relies heavily on other partners to support a wider protective environment.⁴⁰ The limited evidence available found inconsistent treatment of the issue. UNICEF took a strongly proactive approach to protection in the Central African Republic, but five evaluations found weaknesses, including in the Nepal earthquake response and the Syrian refugee response in Turkey.
- **AAP:** The evaluations found that UNICEF has not yet systematically integrated AAP practices into its humanitarian action overall. Of the 16 evaluations that occurred after the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force on Accountability

³⁹ Volker Huls, 'Learning from Humanitarian Action: A synthesis of non-evaluative documents on UNICEF's humanitarian action from 2010-2016', internal unpublished document, 2017.

⁴⁰ <www.unicef.org/protection/57929_62178.html>

to Affected Populations Operational Framework (2011) came into force, to which UNICEF adheres, only 5 found UNICEF to have fully or gradually

implemented AAP commitments whilst 11 found gaps or weaknesses.

14 INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS AFFECTING UNICEF'S HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Institutional factors identified

The Synthesis identified evidence of common institutional characteristics or systems positively and negatively affecting UNICEF's humanitarian action. These are summarized in Table 2 below.

Mixed evidence of attention to preparedness

Preparedness is a corporate commitment under the CCCs. Ten evaluations comment (explicitly or implicitly) on preparedness issues. Three found UNICEF to be well prepared to engage in humanitarian action. Where preparedness was assessed as insufficient (7 out of 10 evaluations), lessons include:

- preparedness plans should be current and regularly updated, as well as concrete and tangible;
- plans should scale up well, even in major emergencies;

- plans should address relationships and the working arrangements with government partners;
- PCAs require emergency clauses; and
- offices should have dedicated staff responsible for emergency preparedness and response.

Strong regional-country office coordination

Eight evaluations praise the role of UNICEF's regional offices in supporting the internal coordination of humanitarian action. Specific contributions included:

- joint fundraising;
- supply and logistics support;
- provision of surge capacity;
- general technical assistance;
- communication, advocacy, and donor relations; and
- supporting research and/or sharing lessons

Table 2: **Institutional factors**

FACTOR	Supported	Constrained
Emergency preparedness	Has supported responses where present, as in Nepal	
Regional-country coordination	Level 2 and Level 3 procedures have supported timely immediate responses, including support from the regional office	Different interpretations of SSOPs at the country level have at times impeded efficiency and effectiveness
Management/staffing/human resource including surge mechanisms	Has been supported by Level 2 and Level 3 procedures, which have enabled, for example, regional surge rosters	Commonly reported as a major constraint, with staffing gaps prominent in several emergency responses
Supply and logistics	Has supported efficiency and effectiveness of responses	Weak or inconsistent end-use monitoring identified
Performance measurement of humanitarian action	Has supported the consistency of performance measurement across different response types	There is a need for increased context specificity, particularly in the varying types of emergency UNICEF now faces
Communications and advocacy	Has played a key role both in raising awareness and funding for the crisis, and has also made a substantive contribution in, for example, the Ebola crisis	Lacking staff capacity at times

Progress on staffing for emergencies but with challenges remaining

Seventeen of the 30 evaluations, as well as non-evaluative material,⁴¹ comment on UNICEF's management/staffing/human resources for emergencies. Positively, evaluations found that the Level 2 or 3 SSOPs have supported swift mobilization of surge human resources, as in the Sahel, Nepal and Typhoon Haiyan disasters, and in the Central African Republic. A 2012 review of the fast-track recruitment process found the mechanism to be effective in getting the right people with the right skills on the ground at the right time.

Nevertheless, speedy and sustainable staffing of emergency operations remains challenging. Evaluations have found:

- over-reliance on short-term deployments, limiting institutional memory in the responses in Rwanda (2014), Yemen (2010), Turkey and Jordan (evaluated in 2015);
- ad-hoc identification of human resources, for example in the Syria regional crisis;
- focus on programme staff at the cost of administrative and budgetary functions, for example in the Mali response of 2013; and
- insufficient use of national staff in Central African Republic in 2013-14 and the Philippines in 2014.

Strong supply and logistics functions supporting efficient response

Eight evaluations comment on UNICEF's supply and logistics capacity in supporting humanitarian response. All eight found it to have positively affected the timeliness of the response, with supplies properly planned, pre-positioned and mobilized in time according to response plans. One remaining concern is the low frequency of end-user monitoring of supplies, though this was only assessed in 5 of the 30 evaluations. Of these five, only the Syria regional response evaluation found positively, with the other four finding gaps or deficits.

A need to revisit results measuring and reporting systems for emergencies

Since the Haiti earthquake of 2011, UNICEF has invested in a corporate system of HPM. HPM establishes a set of common indicators linked to CCC commitments, which harmonizes progress reporting

across different emergencies. Despite some significant progress, of 24 relevant evaluations, just four assessed UNICEF's work positively, whilst the remaining 20 found challenges. Evaluations signalled a particular challenge with HPM's standard indicators, arguing for greater adaptability to context, to better reflect the varying emergencies. Specifically, the evaluations of the Nepal earthquake and Central African Republic crisis responses, and of UNICEF's role as a Cluster Lead Agency, found that the HPM system was too rigid or formal to meet fluid circumstances on the ground. For the Ebola response, HPM was found to be unsuitable for a health emergency.⁴²

Monitoring systems used to assess progress against HPM indicators were also found wanting. Evaluations found these systems to be:

- *incomplete or unrealistic* in some contexts, such as in the response to the Pakistan floods (2013) or the Sahel food crisis response (2012);
- *inconsistently implemented*, for example in Rwanda (2014), in Turkey's Van-Ercis earthquake response in 2015 and during the Ebola response (2014-15);
- *too centralized*, as in Manila during the Typhoon Haiyan response (2014), or running in parallel in different sectors, such as in the Nepal earthquake response (2015); and
- *challenging for partners*, as found in the child-friendly schools programme in the Philippines in 2014 and the Pakistan floods response (2013).

Collectively, these deficiencies caused accountability shortcomings; limited UNICEF's ability to report on performance; and undermined its ability to make a clear, data-driven case for support.

Communications and advocacy supporting emergency response

Fourteen of the 30 evaluations praise UNICEF's communication and advocacy role in emergencies, with this playing a substantive as well as a process support role. Examples include the Sahel crisis, where social media was used for advocacy, and the Syria regional crisis, where advocacy efforts actively helped realize child rights. During the Ebola crisis, the use of Communication for Development approaches provided substantive gains in terms of community behaviour change.

⁴¹ Volker Huls, 'Learning from Humanitarian Action: A synthesis of non-evaluative documents on UNICEF's humanitarian action from 2010-2016', internal unpublished document, 2017.

⁴² A review has been conducted of HPM (in draft at the time of writing).



Conclusions

Overall, this 2017 Synthesis of 30 evaluations of humanitarian action reflects an organization that has evolved considerably since the difficult learning experience of Haiti in 2010. New procedures have been implemented, new ways of working developed, and learning generated and shared. Reforms to the wider humanitarian system – in which UNICEF has played a prominent role – are reflected in improvements to corporate and operational practice.

In line with its fundamental ethos of ground-based action for children in emergencies, evaluations found UNICEF's humanitarian responses to be mostly relevant and aligned with humanitarian needs. Programming also aligns strongly where feasible with national responses, priorities and plans.

The evaluations found that UNICEF takes its humanitarian citizenship seriously, participating in joint responses to emergencies, and prioritizing partnerships – though its connections with government or national authorities are stronger than those with its partner United Nations agencies. UNICEF has also pragmatically embraced new relationships, such as with faith-based and religious groups, where this promises tangible humanitarian gains.

Overall, the evaluations documented here show some important results for children facing conflict and crisis. UNICEF has contributed to reduced transmission of disease; helped prevent hunger and under-nutrition; and provided clean water and education to many vulnerable children. It has protected children in high-threat environments and built the capacity of local and national actors in humanitarian situations.

Yet some consistent weaknesses in UNICEF's humanitarian action remain. Many of these were also reflected in the 2013 Synthesis report. Specific areas identified by the evaluations as needing improvement are as follows:

- *Needs assessments for affected populations* – even under accessible conditions – are sometimes incomplete or too general. Consequently, opportunity-based, rather than needs-based programming, persists.
- *Strategies and programme designs are sometimes weak*, leading to a reactive rather than a proactive approach – linked to factors including limited preparedness, weak strategic frameworks (short term vs medium term) and/or weak needs assessments.

- *AAP commitments have not been fully embraced or addressed*, including embracing the Core Humanitarian Standard and broader commitments towards coordinated approaches for people-centred humanitarian action.
- The revised *Level 2 and 3 operating procedures*, whilst they have supported timely responses to sudden-onset crises, have failed to clarify synergies between the ongoing development efforts of the country programme and the emergency response activities. This has left country teams at best uncertain of their role and at worst, disenfranchised.
- *Internal coherence remains limited*, with a highly sector-based approach impeding effectiveness and constraining results on the ground.

UNICEF has shown itself to be a conscientious adherent to international humanitarian principles. However, the evaluations also reflect the challenges and tensions faced by international actors working in complex governance environments, whilst trying to ensure impartiality and independence. A more explicit position and rationale in specific operating contexts would benefit UNICEF here. Similarly, both the CCCs and the HPM indicators highlight the need for corporate-level frameworks to be adaptable to reflect specificities of context.

Evaluations found that UNICEF is still working to build clear links from humanitarian to development responses. The application of the Level 2 and Level 3 SSOPs has had a major effect in supporting timely responses. Their implications for the existing country programme, and the progression to phase-out or robust transition planning, however, is still a work in progress.

Evaluations found evidence of a more risk-willing approach, an openness to innovation, and a willingness to experiment. However, new procedures available to short-cut administrative burdens are not always applied and used by responsible staff. A culture of confidence in their operational application still needs to be built.

Finally, in its practical humanitarian action, UNICEF has not consistently adopted a proactive approach. Issues such as preparedness, transition planning and AAP have not always kept pace with global shifts. Whilst strategically, UNICEF leads much of the humanitarian debate in its areas of expertise, playing leading roles in the cluster system and other global fora, evaluations reflect a picture of an organization evolving in response to, rather than ahead of, global change.



Recommendations

Based on the evidence arising from these 30 evaluations of humanitarian action, this Synthesis report makes seven recommendations for the future. These are aimed at helping UNICEF improve its humanitarian action, and more effectively and efficiently responding to the needs of the vulnerable children it serves.

1. More stringent requirements to evaluate

UNICEF has gathered a considerable body of evidence on its humanitarian action (76 evaluations since 2010). Its Evaluation Policy states that evaluations of humanitarian action will 'usually be undertaken'. Yet despite a set of corporate triggers, coverage remains unsystematic and patchy – particularly of Level 1 emergencies.

- a. *Action 1.1* UNICEF should consider setting more explicit triggers for its evaluation of humanitarian action. These should be explicitly defined by the Office of Emergency Programmes in discussion with the Evaluation Office. Potential dimensions could include: a) spend (e.g. implementing the commitment in the present Evaluation Policy that an evaluation will usually be undertaken for a programme outcome results area of over \$10 million); b) duration of crisis (e.g. a two-year response); c) strategic importance for the regional office; and d) potential for wider lesson-learning for the organization.

2. Centralize needs in design

Evaluations found that UNICEF's humanitarian action was often insufficiently grounded in needs assessments, even where these were feasible. Programme designs require clearer links to needs.

- a. *Action 2.1* UNICEF's programme designs for humanitarian responses should be required to clearly map the intended pathways from needs to intended results; justify the choices made to test assumptions; and avoid supply-driven responses, placing people (and their evolving needs) firmly at the centre. This should be a fundamental part of programme guidance.
- b. *Action 2.2* Performance monitoring strategies and plans for humanitarian action should clearly focus performance assessment on recording progress in responding to identified needs, and to measuring adaptation as needs change.
- c. *Action 2.3* UNICEF should advocate, under the Grand Bargain process, for the humanitarian system to conduct lesson-learning on the experience of implementing needs assessments, including the challenges of the MIRA approach, and the scope to invest in more detailed/granular needs assessments.

- d. *Action 2.4* Under World Humanitarian Summit outcomes, AAP requires a more proactive, consistent and strategic approach. Meeting its commitments should be a fundamental requirement for all UNICEF's humanitarian action – not an added bonus.

3. Build a culture of confidence in procedures

Given its highly decentralized nature, guidance and procedures issued 'from the centre' are only ever as influential as UNICEF's country management and staff habits permit them to be. New protocols and procedures, such as the Level 2 and 3 SSOPs, need to be accompanied by capacity development and training to build a 'risk-willing' approach.

- a. *Action 3.1* UNICEF should conduct training and awareness-raising of staff and partners on the importance of applying Level 2 and Level 3 SSOPs during humanitarian emergencies, and particularly commitments to speedy PCA processing. Concurrently, management should explicitly confirm the requirement for their implementation as part of corporate procedures for humanitarian action. Where relevant, all evaluations should assess whether these SSOPs have been implemented as required.
- b. *Action 3.2* UNICEF should build awareness among its partners of its commitments to swift PCA processing under its Level 2 and 3 SSOPs. At the same time, it should clarify to partners the mechanisms by which they can hold UNICEF to account should these commitments not be met.

4. Intensify the approach to risk-informed programming within the localization agenda

UNICEF's decentralized structure means that it benefits from a vast cadre of national staff and partners, which provide it with a core capability to prepare for humanitarian action from a localized viewpoint. Under Grand Bargain commitments, preparedness and risk identification should be approached from this perspective. Specific actions include:

- a. *Action 4.1* Planning: All relevant Country Programme Documents should explicitly integrate an analysis of political, fragility, climate and other potential risks, and assess the potential for reversion to emergency conditions. This implies accompanying the analysis with operational integration for the ability to flex if conditions require, as part of risk-informed programming.

- b. *Action 4.2* Local capacity building: UNICEF should build a cadre of ‘first responders’ among partners at the country level, so that country programmes can flex from development to emergency action as conditions merit.
- c. *Action 4.3* Adaptive capacity: UNICEF should ensure that all PCAs include the scope for adaptation to emergency response, as part of preparedness.

5. Revisit the CCCs

The CCCs in their current formulation do not reflect the changing nature of humanitarian crises, and promote siloed rather than integrated responses. They should be revisited.

- a. *Action 5.1* The CCCs could either be revised to reflect the new challenges of humanitarian crises, such as migration and health emergencies, whilst promoting multi-sector responses; or updated to include an addendum, which lists new challenges, sets integrated programming objectives, and supplies an accompanying monitoring framework.

6. Accountability with flexibility

Performance monitoring of humanitarian action is a consistent challenge, yet the evaluations analysed here found considerable scope to improve UNICEF’s monitoring of its own performance in emergencies, in line with recent internal efforts to strengthen HPM.⁴³

- a. *Action 6.1* UNICEF should accelerate efforts to further integrate HPM with country-level monitoring systems, to ensure that indicators express both global information needs and local realities.

- b. *Action 6.2* Under its HPM approach, UNICEF should prioritize extending the range of outcome indicators available, to better reflect qualitative changes in conditions for affected populations as part of its accountability commitments.

7. Link programme integration to recovery

A more explicit and defined strategic overview within UNICEF’s humanitarian action is needed, which is firmly geared to resilience and transition goals. This should be linked to the revisited CCCs, above.

- a. *Action 7.1* Collective planning needs to take place across programme areas, with multi-sector programming geared to the same intended goals of resilience and transition. Targets set should be high-level and overarching, rather than limited or sector-specific.
- b. *Action 7.2* Regional offices need to supply cross-sectoral, rather than programmatic, engagement with UNICEF country teams.
- c. *Action 7.3* UNICEF should better define its strategy for protracted emergencies, with a clear linkage to transition, below.
- d. *Action 7.4* The need for transition plans should be clearly defined and integrated within corporate guidance, recognizing different emergency types, and the inevitable presence of protracted crises. All humanitarian responses should be designed and implemented with a clear view towards changing needs and evolving programme modalities, with transition becoming a central part of UNICEF’s core humanitarian cycle and ethos.

⁴³ A full review of the HPM approach in 2016, included in the synthesis of non-evaluative work, found similarly that HPM is often seen as being too rigid, often separate from existing monitoring and evaluation systems at the country level, and not always offering appropriate indicators. Its recommendations are presently being actioned by UNICEF.

To download the full report, visit:
https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_100819.html

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