

MICS Evaluation – Executive Summary

Background to the Evaluation

In recent years, demand for high quality, internationally comparable social data has grown considerably as part of the aid effectiveness agenda and as a measurement option for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2015 target date. Household surveys serve as an important means of obtaining such evidence, in part, through a small set of recognized, international programmes which produce comparable data on common indicators.

UNICEF plays an important role in data generation for these purposes through its implementation of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), an international household survey programme. UNICEF serves as the lead agency for reporting on six MDGs related to children. Of the 48 indicators of progress toward the MDGs, the MICS provides data on twenty-three. Together with a separate but related household survey program, the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), MICS is a fundamental source for assessing progress towards national and global development achievements and challenges. As part of the international statistical infrastructure, UNICEF also helps develop methodologies and indicators, maintain global databases, and disseminate and publish relevant data. The MICS survey platform has evolved through content expansion and efforts to improve data quality over four rounds since the origin in the mid-1990s. All told, more than 240 MICS surveys have been conducted in more than 100 countries. By late 2012, Round 4 was nearly complete and Round 5 preparations underway for an early 2013 commencement. The imminent conclusion of the MDG period in 2015 makes MICS Round 5 an important source for estimating the success of the MDG efforts over the period 1990-2015.

The post-2015 environment is already characterized by an even greater attention on and demand for data with important implications for countries and development partners. Likewise, as development agencies intensify their focus on outcome- and impact-level data, household survey programmes are viewed as the vehicle to meet these needs. UNICEF is positioned to contribute to these efforts through MICS.

Owing to its importance and size, the MICS programme is periodically evaluated. Global evaluations followed the MICS Round 1 and MICS Round 3 (2007-08). The current evaluation provides UNICEF and other stakeholders with an independent external view of its current management and utilization of the MICS programme, based on the round 4 experience.

Purpose

The purpose of this evaluation was to assess whether the critical governance strategies and technical elements are in place to ensure maximum quality, utilization, and sustainability of MICS over time. It is expected that the credible and forward looking evidence generated by the evaluation will (a) guide UNICEF's future MICS work and partnerships when implementing the 2014-2017 Strategic Plan (SP) and Country Programmes and (b) support UNICEF's positioning with regards to data and monitoring to advance the post 2015 sustainable development agenda and children's rights in the coming years. This is a formative evaluation designed to support changes to achieve greater effectiveness. It does not attempt to measure the impact of MICS.

Evaluation Scope

The evaluation was divided into two distinct parts which can be read independently. This allowed different skills to be applied to each part. It also reflects differentiated audiences. Part 1 is geared more toward the technical teams that actually design and execute the MICS surveys. Part 2 is geared more toward the leadership bodies that determine the strategic role and funding of MICS. It is also geared toward the broad set of internal and external users that desire to employ MICS in many different ways.

Part 1 examined needs related to Round 5 preparations: the corporate response to the Round 3 evaluation recommendations; how far lessons drawn from prior rounds had been acted on; and the degree to which technical preparations for Round 5 were appropriate and sufficient. Four main themes were prioritized for examination: (i) the availability, allocation, function and effectiveness of human resources, including technical support (i.e. UNICEF staff and UNICEF–hired consultants); (ii) management and decision-making processes around MICS implementation at all levels (i.e. HQ/SMS/MICS, RO, CO and implementing agencies); (iii) survey implementation including threats to data quality (i.e. adherence to protocols and standards) across all phases of survey operations; and (iv) quality of MICS4 data.

Part 2 focused on whether MICS design, management and data utilization processes ensure maximum value is received from the considerable investments made. Three questions guided this part of the evaluation: (i) to what extent are UNICEF and partners able to assure adequate funding in terms of quality, timeliness, and stability, for round 5 and, if possible, later rounds?; (ii) how far is MICS coherently and efficiently designed to meet stakeholders' diverse needs and demands, taking note of requirements and expectations for statistical and analytical capacity development?; and (iii) how far have consumers of the data at various levels been exploiting the potentials of the rounds 3 and 4 MICS data across diverse purposes (e.g. research, policy advocacy, decision taking about going to scale etc)?

Methodology

The evaluation drew on mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative, including structured document review, participant observation in three MICS expert meetings, interviews and group discussions with key stakeholders via both face-to-face and electronic communications, and two case studies (Madagascar and Costa Rica). In addition, Part 1 included an on-line expert-practitioner panel and data quality assessment using standard (published) tabulations from 47 MICS4 surveys from 40 countries, some of which allowed comparison with MICS3 or a DHS surveys. Part 2 included an on-line survey of MICS data users. The intended audience of this evaluation in terms of those accountable for the management response is largely internal to UNICEF and comprised of managers with responsibilities for governance and oversight of the data and analyses agenda as well as those responsible for managing and directing resources for data collection across levels (i.e. Headquarters, Regional and Country offices). It is expected that stakeholders in global social data issues external to UNICEF will also be interested.

Findings – Part 1

Technical Support and Human Resources

The 2008 evaluation identified a number of areas in which limited human resources served as an important impediment to the quality and timeliness of the MICS. The current evaluation found that UNICEF has significantly expanded the envelope of technical support resources available to guide MICS implementation. This has been accomplished through the placement of Regional MICS Coordinators in the Regional Offices, use of HQ/SMS/MICS- and regionally-based expert consultants, and UNICEF MICS consultants working with Country Offices. To highlight a few of these developments:

- All regions had a Regional MICS coordinator albeit with one partial exception. Coordinators play a crucial quality assurance role by facilitating technical assistance and providing direct support. An important evaluation finding was that job descriptions for the Coordinators vary considerably in key elements including purpose, placement of the MICS within their major duties and responsibilities, and relationships with HQ/SMS/MICS and Country Offices.
- As a result of UNICEF substantially expanding the pool of expert consultants more Country Offices used expert consultant services in Round 4, particularly for sampling and data processing. Users typically rated this external technical support as timely and effective. However, MICS implementation was hindered, in some cases, by limited supply and availability of expert consultants.
- The programme introduced the use of national consultants (UNICEF MICS Consultants) to coordinate and quality assure the MICS surveys in individual countries. Regional MICS Coordinators spoke consistently of the importance of having the UNICEF MICS Consultants in place as they provide a consistent and informed point of contact and reduced turn-around times. Many Regional Coordinators would like to see country offices required to hire a MICS Consultant rather than leaving it optional as in round 4.
- UNICEF developed and introduced a more structured approach to technical review and quality assurance processes. A comprehensive set of steps now depicts when materials are to be reviewed and by whom. While interviewees in country offices and implementing agencies recognized the value of the reviews, difficulties were consistently cited about length of time required for RO and/or HQ/SMS/MICS to review and feedback to the country office.

Preparations for Round 5 at the time of the evaluation included efforts to identify and recruit additional expert consultants. Some Regional Offices remain interested in contracting with regional institutions capable of providing some of the needed support. In Round 5, UNICEF is seeking greater consistency in approach and messages among the expert consultants. To this end, HQ/SMS/MICS has organized expert workshops where all MICS tools and materials are reviewed in detail and experts have opportunity to share experiences and lessons based on their work in Round 4. Finally, the technical review and quality assurance process is being re-examined and revised with greater emphasis on early stage agreement with implementing agencies. Newly acquired external funding will allow HQ/SMS/MICS team to add much needed staff.

Decision-Making and Governance

The 2008 evaluation found that UNICEF's organizational structure and governance was suboptimal for the achievement of the MICS objective in several ways. Two notable challenges were: (i) a "mismatch" wherein survey expertise resided at HQ/SMS/MICS and, to a lesser extent, at regional levels, while the locus of technical

decision making was at country level, and (ii) limited accountability around strategic measurement choices among senior management at country office level.

The current evaluation found that although the technical support envelope has clearly been expanded, organizational structure, communication channels and decision-making authorities remain unchanged. Recommendations arising from the prior evaluation (i.e. clarifying accountabilities and shifting the locus of technical decision-making) have not been addressed, and some critical weaknesses persist. For example several Regional Coordinators described instances in which Country Office chose not to comply with the full package of MICS guidelines, technical support and technical review/quality assurance processes. Two important areas in which Country Offices deviate from the recommendations of Regional Coordinators are in sample size (many offices opting for very large samples) and the use of non-MICS questions and modules. Moreover, there is no feedback loop to inform Regional Coordinators whether RO and HQ/SMS/MICS advice was followed.

Several of the issues identified in this section—e.g. CO discretion around compliance with quality assurance steps—are embedded in UNICEF’s organizational structure and are beyond the ability of the HQ/SMS/MICS team or individual Regional Offices alone to address. The evaluation found no evidence that these issues are on the agenda of senior managers at either HQ or regional levels. Other elements amenable to the efforts of the global MICS team Regional Coordinators have been discussed in global consultations. Noteworthy is the revision of the MOU between UNICEF and implementing agencies. However, the team did not find plans in place for either (i) improved documentation of the Global MICS Consultations nor (ii) methods to better assess risk in situations where compliance with the data sharing clause is anticipated to be a problem. Regional Office M&E Chiefs were attuned to the demands of the coming round with priorities tailored to their regions. Based on Round 4 experience, several anticipate being more forceful in discussions with countries on their understanding of the MICS package including quality assurance and data sharing.

Quality Assurance and Timeliness

The 2008 evaluation found that UNICEF had put in place several mechanisms that contributed to acceptance of best practices and improved data quality (e.g. MICS Manuals and regional training workshops). However, areas of concern were noted as well specifically related to sample sizes, timeliness of reports, adherence to data collection guidelines and content/length of the questionnaire. In the current evaluation, improvements were seen in some areas but not others. Among the highlighted findings:

- The evaluation team found almost universal adherence to the standards on training duration for MICS4, a great improvement from MICS3.
- By contrast, there was no consistent evidence that observations of interviews and spot checks were implemented during MICS4 data collection. Likewise, field check tables—a newly-introduced quality assurance procedure—was inconsistently implemented.
- In countries implementing both MICS rounds, the average sample size increased to 18,122 in MICS4, compared to 14,041 in MICS3. Prompting this 30% increase is the demand for valid results estimates at lower administrative levels (e.g. districts) for planning and reporting purposes. The larger surveys thus employed more than the recommended, manageable numbers of teams and field workers.

- The time between the end of field work and final report publication declined from an average 21 months in MICS3 to 14 months in MICS4. Despite this remarkable improvement, the interval between the end of field work and the release of final reports remains beyond the 12-month standard in the MICS guidance.

For Round 5, plans are in place to: a) Revise the Memorandum of Understanding with implementing agencies to include a stipulation on timeliness; b) more thoroughly incorporate tools such as the field check tables into MICS workshops and guidelines; c) reinforce and expand the use of household survey expert consultants and UNICEF MICS consultants; and d) use more systematic methods test new or revised modules, often as a partnership between UNICEF and other stakeholders. These are all positive adjustments.

Data Quality Assessment

The prior evaluation concluded that MICS3 data was, generally, of good quality, with some important exceptions. Compared to the DHS, the MICS showed greater variability in data quality on a country-by-country basis, which is the consequence of UNICEF’s decentralized organization and divergence from adherence to international standards. The current evaluation made three clear findings in this area:

- There has been a dramatic improvement between MICS3 and MICS4 across all quality indicators covered in the analysis.
- MICS and DHS have comparable data quality in many indicators. MICS4 advantages were noted in a few indicators, notably the completeness of weight and height measurements, while DHS performed better in the displacement of reported ages from 4 years to 5 years.
- Despite the progress, the quality of some of MICS4 data still need a great deal of improvement.

The marked improvements in data quality between MICS3 and MICS4 are a result of all the adjustments noted earlier, notably the improvements in human resources and technical support. Resolving the challenges already noted would lead to further improvements in data quality.

Findings – Part 2

Funding

Based on a review of MICS budgets from 42 countries (2010-2012), the estimated average cost of a survey was \$746,000. The known costs of conducting a MICS survey have increased between rounds 3 and 4 driven by rising costs of inputs, expanded technical support and increased sample sizes. However, estimating the total cost of a MICS survey is still limited by the lack of data on the contributions of governments. UNICEF remains the largest funder of the MICS surveys with Country Office contributions totaling 37% of required funds and HQ-allocated “top-up” monies also at 37%. Among other contributors, UNFPA and USAID stand out for the number of MICS supported or the amount contributed, respectively.

Practices at country level to raise other sources of funding have changed little from previous rounds. There does not appear to be any commonly-used or systematic process of identifying or approaching partner agencies in-country for contributions – no “game plan” for how a Country Office would go about acquiring external resources. The lack of a “game plan” is important for two reasons. A Resource Mobilization Strategy for the Data and Analytics Section (2014) estimated that governments and donors in-country could be

contributing 35% of the costs of a MICS survey (currently these sources represent approximately 26%). In addition, while senior managers were consistently laudatory of the MICS survey programme, they also pointed to a serious lack of predictability in funding and cited the need for an increasingly diversified resource base.

Meeting Stakeholder Needs

The MICS survey programme, as represented by the accomplishments of the fourth round and the preparations for the fifth round, has demonstrated a considerable ability to adapt. Compared to the earlier evaluations, UNICEF staff exhibit greater understanding of MICS purpose and limitations. For example, respondents had a greater recognition of the negative implication of larger sample sizes and cited the efforts of the HQ/SMS/MICS team and RO MICS Coordinators in raising awareness of the issue.

Respondents across levels consistently flagged two critical gaps in the topics covered by MICS modules--specifically child disability and adolescents. These are priority groups in the UNICEF strategic plan and their absence in MICS will create future reporting, planning, and advocacy difficulties.

A best practice continued from earlier rounds is the utilization of inter-agency working groups to develop MICS content. The working relationships between programme area experts and data/analysis experts was frequently cited as a strongly positive factor in shaping and guiding data collection and analytical efforts including MICS.

Data Utilization

MICS data are being used increasingly in multi-country analyses which utilize common conceptual frameworks to examine issues such as child poverty and children out-of-school. These uses are notable in that they are not one-time analytical efforts but systematic, multi-country endeavors with built-in technical support mechanisms. A facilitating factor may be that there is now an adequate "critical mass" of data collected through standard methods and with known quality to build upon. In contrast to the MICS3 evaluation where use was primarily related to global-level monitoring, the current evaluation found MICS data utilized in a wide range of analytical efforts by a diverse set of actors. Factors that facilitate the use of MICS data include increased confidence in data quality and increased ability to combine data from MICS and DHS data sets. Limiting factors include insufficient analytic capacity at the country level, and certain technical aspects of the data bases. UNICEF also does not actively monitor or collate the use of MICS data by external partners and others, thereby missing a chance to support learning about utilization and technical exchange.

High Level Conclusions

Considering parts 1 and 2 as a whole leads to higher level conclusions than the many specific findings already noted. The most important are these:

(1) The technical teams that design and implement MICS have used their skills and authority to realize significant improvements from round 3 to round 4. Increasing resources and autonomy at this level has had almost uniformly positive results. Nonetheless, there are still some major improvements that can be made at this level.

(2) Technical limitations that persist tend to originate outside the technical cadres. For example, the very large sample sizes is a policy issue at the level of UNICEF and national leaders. It is not clear that the

voice of the technical cadres is sufficiently heard when making choices that result in technical difficulties.

(3) MICS is perceived by most stakeholders to result from a firm commitment by UNICEF to support global data needs. However, the actual ‘architecture’ of that commitment is weak. Elements as basic as a clear strategy and secure funding approach are lacking. Put simply, the actual commitment does not meet the implied commitment.

(4) Once MICS results are available, they enter a global user’s marketplace as a public good. That market is rapidly innovating, finding new and exciting ways to employ MICS data. The management of this marketing and use arm of MICS in UNICEF—in comparison to the data generation arm—has not realized as much of the potential that exists despite heightened investments and some positive results.

Recommendations

Overarching Strategic Recommendations

(1) UNICEF should enter the post-2015 period with a cogent strategy to guide its data efforts. Such a strategy does not now exist, and MICS would need to be a central element.

(2) UNICEF should develop tools to better gauge MICS costs and contributions with a view toward sustainable survey implementation. Tools are needed to better acquire external funding, to collect data on value of government contributions, and to better estimate, plan and manage technical assistance resources.

(3) UNICEF should expand the attention given to MICS data utilization. For priority themes, multi-country analyses should become the “norm” much as inter-agency working groups are for the development content. Analysis workshops should be conducted around specific themes by inviting partners to bring data—including both DHS and MICS where available—and to develop an analysis plan.

Technical Recommendations

For maximum utility, the technical recommendations are grouped according to their anticipated impact and implementation timeframe.

High-impact, immediate action possible

(1) Country offices should be required to hire a UNICEF MICS Consultant for the conduct of the MICS.

(2) Given their undisputed value, more regional consultants should be available through the regional pools.

(3) The technical review and quality assurance processes need to be more firmly built into key guidance materials including the Design Workshop and Manual.

(4) Where MICS final reports are lagging, additional technical support should be provided to prepare the report. The Memorandum of Understanding with national partners should include this option.

(5) UNICEF should address the country-level demand for lower-level survey estimates (e.g. at district and sub-district) by investing in the development and testing of alternative data collection tools and support. The efforts should be positioned as complementary to the MICS and other large-scale household survey programs.

High impact, mid-term

(6) To compensate for a shortage of data processing/analytic capacity in some locations, more experts should be recruited either as individuals or through institutions.

(7) Ensure that the improvements possible through the consistent use of the field check tables are realized.

Medium impact, immediate

(8) Increased guidance and support is needed for Regional Coordinators and their supervisors to gauge risk *in advance* of a firm agreement in countries where compliance issues are a concern, and to define processes for course-corrections or withdrawal when warranted.

(9) Sensitization about MICS is needed for senior managers at all levels on key issues, including clear guidance on “Do’s and Don’ts” in their decision-taking roles.

(10) Record-keeping and archiving should be improved in several areas, including documentation protocols for consultants and the results of global expert consultations.

Medium impact, mid-term

(11) A protocol for documentation of sample design and implementation in the field should be developed.

(12) Spot checks and observations of interviews during field work must be ensured and documented.

(13) Having vacancies in the critical Regional Coordinator position should be avoided.